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The Origin of Image:

The Matte Black Painting of Clyfford Still

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The Origin of Image:

The Matte Black Painting of Clyfford Still

by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my mother and my sister.

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Abstract

The Origin of Image:

The Matte Black Paintings of Clyfford Still

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This thesis seeks to address a gap in the literature on the artwork of the American Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still (1904-1980). Research on Still has been facilitated in recent years by the opening of the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver, Colorado. However, few of the resultant publications have provided formal and phenomenological analysis of what may be Still's most challenging work: his paintings in predominantly matte black. The matte black paintings at the center of this research (reproduced in Figures 1-5) are paradigmatic of Still's conception of painting as an instrument of personal revelation and insight, rather than collective concern. As such, I take as primary sources Still's own diaries and personal library, in addition to articles and critiques written during the time when Still created these five matte black works (1944-1957). The resulting synthesis reveals Still's concern for the mechanics and conventions of sight, and

more importantly, the paintings' wordless communication throughout time and to an expanding audience.

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Introduction: "Import and feeling…"

"As for myself, I never painted a picture for anyone but myself, and the personal intimacy of the canvas that escapes the miniature dimension releases the painter from concern with the self-consciousness of detail -- social in its import and feeling."[1] - Clyfford Still

Reduction is a theoretical pursuit. Both analysis and the theories that result from analysis are forms of reduction; historians gain insight from these constructions that can only be classified as circumspect or hypothetical. Much like a scientific hypothesis, an art historical reduction can never be proven, but instead is supported or rejected by pertinent evidence. Take a case from history: the life and work of the artist Clyfford Still (1904-1980). In the most literal sense of the word, to *reduce* is to lead back or renew: in the case of an historical figure, be it a politician, poet, or philosopher, a reduction is often constructed through the details of the records such figures leave behind. As the historian peruses these remnants, the task is to renew their significance in terms of the past and the present. As discourse surrounding Still expands and offers well-constructed reductions of his work, truth never resolves—only possibilities.

Accordingly, an analysis of Clyfford Still is most useful when the scholar is able to get close to the significance of ideas and artifacts as they were apprehended at their origins, as well as in their present. Still painted nearly one thousand canvases in his lifetime, an endeavor that he accompanied with drawings, sculptures, and aesthetic theory, which the artist recorded in his diaries and correspondence. The following thesis takes as its objects of analysis five of Still's matte black paintings (see Figures 1-5). As I have sat with and observed Still's work, questions arise which cannot be answered by an interrogation of the object only.

Why look at a canvas which seems to be entirely without detail and compositional interest? Why do I feel differently about these works than others by Still? These are inquiries which cannot be satisfied by looking at Still's painted legacy. Rather, hypotheses can only be posited, and substantiated with evidence from other parts of the artist's history. The result is hardly conclusive or definite; much like the paintings Still created, his diaries, correspondence, and even his personal library yield no easy answers. It is almost as though, in light of Still's contradictions and unwavering suspicion of "fact," all reductions could be possible, and a historian might claim anything about the significance of his canvases.

Furthermore, it is not always necessary to respect the intentions and recorded legacy of the artist. There are many instances in which the biography of an artist, or his or her theoretical concerns, passions, or ideas have little bearing on the objects of their practice. This information is helpful only as it further illuminates the work at hand. In the case of Clyfford Still, there is not yet scholarship that rivals the artist's own writings. Still intentionally discouraged analysis of his paintings, exhibiting selectively throughout his life and preferring to write his own catalogue statements when a text was absolutely necessary.

Only the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art possess a number of his paintings. With these few large holdings, Still's artwork was woefully sequestered from 1980 until 2011. It was in this year that the Clyfford Still Museum hosted its inaugural exhibition; today, the CSM maintains 95% of the artist's total output and the entirety of his personal library and archives.

While conducting research for this thesis, I have attempted to stay close to the sources of information with which Still was familiar. As such, I have quoted primary sources that Still is confirmed to have read, based on accounts from his diaries and correspondence, along with the

volumes contained in his library. For instance, my research privileges the writings of Clement Greenberg, with whom Still was in contact throughout his life. While Still did not agree with much of what Greenberg published, the critic's accounts are phenomenologically rich and reveal sensitivity toward the ineffable qualities of Still's monochromatic work.

Still's own records also figure prominently in this analysis. At certain points in my writing, Still and I diverge in our conceptions of his work; at others points, our discourses run parallel. Still's refusal to record clear reductions of his own has resulted in many divergent assessments of his painting. In 2016, Cathleen Chaffee, Chief Curator at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, worked with abstract painter Mark Bradford (born 1961) to stage the most sensitive and rigorous exhibition of Still's matte black work to date.[2] The central organizing principle behind *Shade* is stated succinctly on the Albright-Knox's web page for the show: "As an African American abstract painter, Bradford chooses to read Still's relationship with black as an open-minded invitation to dialogue."[3]

Bradford and Chaffee's reduction of Still's matte black works revolves around the metaphorical and symbolic connotations of the color and word "black." This appropriation is grounded in the contemporary social concerns that have come to define this new millennium. Chaffee, in her catalogue essay "Light out of Black," substantiates her and Bradford's interest in details from Still's life. Significantly, Chaffee cites a conversation between Still and Seymour H. Knox, Jr. in which the artist asked if the world might one day be ready for a "black Christ" (à la Gauguin's *Yellow Christ* from 1889, in the collection of what was then known as the Albright Art Gallery).[4]

While this is a moving coincidence and anecdote, the story Chaffee cites represents a contrast between our scholarship. Methodologically, I have chosen to take seriously statements

by Still in which he adamantly decries social and political interpretations of his work. One such statement comes from Still's diary and describes an interaction with the more politically-minded artist Barnett Newman:

> When Barnett Newman boasted to me many months ago that he had "killed painting" I reminded him that the problem had always been how to make painting "live". And I was speaking of it on the highest level -- above aesthetics or neuroticism, beyond the illustration of philosophical cliches and outside the realm of social or political ethics and uses.[5]

I stated previously that Still's writing and paintings remain equally dynamic. As such, it is possible to both authenticate the concerns that led Bradford and Chaffee to undertake their group exhibition, and to provide conflicting evidence from the same source: Still's life. By no means is the following research intended to "disprove" the hypothesis of other scholars. Rather, this writing offers the rich material of Still's diaries and correspondence, his library, and his most challenging abstract paintings for the consideration of future scholars, all operating with their own concerns and interests.

I shall not attempt to make political the following analysis and hypothesis. However, I do believe that Still's matte black work resonates on a frequency more fundamental than that explicated by Chaffee and Bradford. I shall attempt to support the following claim throughout this thesis: that Still's matte black work reinitiates the dynamic origins of our[6] sense of sight. The phenomenological apprehension of Still's work precedes all following instances of sight and reveals each moment of detail rendered by our eyes to be as arbitrary as the first. In the literal sense of the word, Still's matte black paintings reduce our sight to its first instances.

Chapter 1: Critical Engagement of Relevant Literature

"Like all evolution, that of black in painting has been made in jumps. But since the Impressionists it seems to have made continuous progress, taking a more and more important part in color orchestration, comparable to that of the double-bass as a solo instrument."[7]

- Henri Matisse

"Black was never a color of death or terror for me. I think of it as warm—and generative. But color is what you choose to make it."[8]

- Clyfford Still

Clyfford Still's paintings not only precede their comprehension, but their apprehension. I notice a painting by Still in a gallery before I am aware of what draws my attention to it: I apprehend this painting before neighboring works assert their presence. There are many reasons for this peculiar quality, the first of which must be acknowledged as my familiarity and interest in Still's painting. Another quality that pushes Still's work to the front of my attention is their scale: these works are generally quite large, many of them approaching the size of the wall on which they are positioned.

Yet another eye-catching quality of Still's work is their consistency in appearance. His abstract paintings follow a regular visual motif - one accumulated out of the artist's use of a paint trowel to completely cover the canvas with a gritty impasto. Once activated by my attention, comprehension slowly follows, though it never catches up to my looking. There is too much information available to easily comprehend the effects Still's work has on my vision.

This engagement is particularly relevant to Still's matte black paintings (see Figures 1 - 5), which punctuate the course of the painter's vast practice. The matte black paintings remain consistent with the tropes in Still's development of his characteristic motif: vertical "life lines" (Still's term) thinly dividing the canvas, with a few bright, contrasting colors nestled in the crevices or on the margins of the dominant color of the painting—in this case deep black. Still's motif centers on facilitating experience, and the matte black paintings at the core of my research are paradigmatic of the effects of his total abstraction. I argue that these effects arise from the dark matte surface of the paintings – out of the capacity for black to absorb light, facilitating the revelation of flecks of color from other canvases as well as inconsistencies in texture, depth, and value that generate an ever-shifting impression: one that never resolves itself as an image possessing a specific referent.

Motif as it relates to the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists, and in particular, Clyfford Still, is a word that mandates a consistent definition pertaining to its use. In the case of this research into Still's painting practice, the meaning of motif centers on material qualities—the repeated, possibly habitual, manner of deploying pigment on the surface of a canvas.

With the burden of accurate representation subsumed by the mechanics of the camera and its photograph, painting became an avenue for plumbing the depths of the visual, independent of the aim of exact reproduction.[9] Theorists of the postwar era have documented this technical shift comprehensively, and I shall not repeat its history.[10] More germane to Still's situation is Clement Greenberg's appraisal of the successes of what he called "American-type" painting. This was a practice that pared down the manipulation of pigment and surface, leading it ever further away from traditional representational values. Greenberg's account provides a theoretical

justification—albeit indirect—for Still's phenomenologically rigorous, matte black works on canvas.[11]

The shift from focusing on representational reference to materiality in the reception of paintings affects our expectations—how we glean experience from the stimulus of a configured canvas. Irving Sandler explains in the introduction to his canonical *The Triumph of American Painting* that the American artistic crisis of the postwar era was one of subject matter: the topic represented. In light of photography's contribution to the discourse, an audience might engage with the stimuli beyond taking it as representative or referential to a preexisting form. The perceived failure of prevailing ideologies after the Second World War turned artists away from tradition and convention inward toward the individual's perception and evaluation of the changing world.

Sandler concisely notes the origins of the Abstract Expressionist generation's intense focus on the strictly material qualities of painting: "The urgent need for meanings that felt truer to their experience gave rise to new ways of seeing - to formal innovations."[12] Despite introducing his study as an "elucidation" of the tendencies of gesture and Color Field painting, Sandler's vocabulary stays close to the phenomenon of vision as a whole. Sandler's use of the word "elucidation" itself could be an indication of the hold exerted by a concern for vision when addressing the abstractions created by the New York School.[13]

The history of painting has revealed vision to be a dynamic phenomenon rather than a simple relay of stimuli and response. Abstraction in particular illuminates differences in vision between spectators and re-defines our understanding of sight.[14] One could say, simply, that Abstract Expressionist painting was painting *about* vision as much as were Impressionist endeavors in the same medium. Still's painting specifically lacks the referents of Impressionist

work – "seen" today in Monet's most abstract and monochrome depictions of water lilies (Figure 6). Without titles to stunt imagination, Still's matte black works betray sight as constantly in motion, as their apprehension is anything but immediate and consistent.

Still's creating a surface of almost entirely matte black paint illuminates the artist's own concern for the mechanics of sight. "Perceiving subjects," to borrow a term from the writings of phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty,[15] operate with a conventionalized understanding of black and white. While black and white are not technically colors, as they do not possess particular wavelengths, their presence is apprehended phenomenologically. Objects and environs which are said to be *white* reflect all wavelengths of visible light simultaneously; alternatively, objects and environs which we describe as *black* absorb most wavelengths of light, and reflect very little that reaches our eyes.[16]

Still's choice of matte black paint is fundamental to his paintings' exceptionality and position at the center of this thesis. The artist did create other monochrome works in oil paint, such as *PH-1180* from 1949 in white (Figure 7) and *November 1950* in yellow (Figure 8); but Still's work in matte black remains paradigmatic of his concern for the phenomenon of vision. This concern is substantiated by the suppression of competing wavelengths provided by a black ground: since white reflects all wavelengths, those corresponding to variation in color become dimmed. The matte black ground of works such as *PH-108* (1949, see Figure 2) and *PH-1106* (1950, see Figure 4) allows for any flecks of paint still adhering to the surface of the canvas to shine forth and entice deeper gazing. The hot reflections of large-scale white and yellow monochromes punish close looking, as does the glare forming on varnished black works by Still, such as *PH-397* (Figure 9).

The phenomenological basis for engaging Still's matte black canvases is often blunted by socially-minded—and therefore context-specific—readings of the painter's rigorous abstractions. Without any suggestion of image, and in the case of Still's austere painting without tangible referent, audiences tend to reduce their sight to the suggestion of a subject and move on. The following section serves as an appraisal of accounts of Still's abstraction, insofar as the scholarship resists (and only occasionally substantiates) a phenomenological reading of Still's matte black canvases.

Early Documents

Sandler's assertion in *The Triumph of American Painting* was formulated retroactively, and addresses the period 1942-1952.[17] This thesis takes as its "era" the years 1944 to 1957, during which Still completed five of his most challenging and uninhabited works (see Figures 1-5). The crisis at the forefront of the Abstract Expressionists' innovations is identifiable in early statements from these artists, one example of which was written by Adolph Gottlieb and Mark Rothko and addressed to Edward Alden Jewell, Arts editor of the *New York Times* in 1943:

> *The Rape of Persephone* is a poetic expression of the essence of the myth; the presentation of the concept of seed and its earth with all its brutal implications: the impact of elemental truth.
>
> [...]
>
> It is just as easy to explain *The Syrian Bull* as a new interpretation of an archaic image, involving unprecedented distortions. Since art is timeless, the significant rendition of a symbol, no matter how archaic, has as full validity today as the archaic symbol had then.
>
> [...]

> It is a widely accepted notion among painters that it does not matter what one paints as long as it is well painted. This is the essence of academism. There is no such thing as good painting about nothing. We assert that the subject is crucial and only that subject-matter is valid which is tragic and timeless. That is why we profess spiritual kinship with primitive and archaic art.[18]

Here, the early representatives of Abstract Expressionist thought betray an imprecise confidence in the importance of depicting and reevaluating *myth*. Both Gottlieb and Rothko identify this vague term as fundamental to the development of social systems into which the artist is forcefully embedded. *The Rape of Persephone* by Gottlieb (Figure 10) and *The Syrian Bull* by Rothko (Figure 11) represent these foundational (and archaic) myths of Western culture as abstracted symbols. In the minds of Rothko and Gottlieb, subjecting the myth to distortion, while retaining reference to narrative, illusion, and tangible forms inspires the audience to question the centrality of this story to their own morality or ethics.

Rothko and Gottlieb's statement is rooted in the logic that in order to change the way a people conceives of the world, the primary and foundational basis for their worldview (the peoples' myth) must be reevaluated.[19] Subject matter and its "distortion" (read: abstraction) remains a barrier in the early articulations of Abstract Expressionist thought, and remains a crutch for critics and viewers alike to this day.

According to research conducted by Bonnie Clearwater, Curator of the Mark Rothko Foundation in 1984, Rothko's drafts of his own letter to Jewell served as the basis for the group effort completed with Gottlieb.[20] In the early drafts of his statement, Rothko treads a boundary between presenting his works as stimuli to be apprehended phenomenologically, and as possessive of "archaic prototypes" harkening back to early art and architecture:

> Anyone familiar with the evolution of modern art knows what potent catalyzers negro (sic) sculpture and the art of the Aegean were at its inception. And since this inception the most gifted men of our time, whether they seated their models in their studio, or found within themselves the models for their art, have distorted these models until they awoke the traces of their archaic prototypes and it is this distortion which symbolizes the spiritual face of our time.[21]

Writing alone, Rothko claims affinity for the myth as a dynamic object for the artists' "distortion." Perhaps more accurately, Western civilization's foundational myths were abstracted in the New York School's nascent undertakings and justified in Rothko's, and then Gottlieb and Rothko's "manifesto." The confidence that Rothko betrays in outlining the retention of specific referents within otherwise abstract forms has sustained decades of tedious readings of Abstract Expressionist work, most erroneously Clyfford Still's blatant, monochromatic abstractions. To experience a painting phenomenologically is at odds with its intellectual comprehension. In Rothko's early assertions, the intellectual mode of experience proved most appealing to subsequent critics.

Throughout Gottlieb's and Rothko's joint letter, it is unclear how many artists of their generation are included under their use of a possessive as broad as "our." What seems certain is that at the time it was penned, the authors of the letter had no familiarity with the paintings of Clyfford Still. Rothko was introduced to Still months later by a mutual friend: Stanford University musicologist Earle Blew.[22] Still's diaries indicate that he was introduced to Gottlieb in 1946 through Peggy Guggenheim, who stated she saw him inspecting Still's works in her gallery.[23] My diversion into the early musings of Abstract Expressionism's central "theorists" can only be justified by the fact that, three years after his letter was published by the *New York*

Times, Rothko wrote the introduction included in the catalogue from Clyfford Still's first solo exhibition in New York City.[24]

With his introduction, Rothko initiates a practice still very much in place today: distilling the experience of Still's paintings to a comprehensible format, most commonly through the use of words. This very thesis serves as a recent product of this undertaking. More significantly, Rothko's statement sets the precedent for how Still's baffling abstractions elicit inadequate analysis as critics and historians appropriate their mystery to serve specious agendas. In the case of Rothko, his appropriation centered on Still's canvases as evocative of early, perhaps even entirely new, mythic content.

Still himself was aware, and therefore dubious, of Rothko's self-serving analysis of myth. Diary entries from 1945 indicate that Peggy Guggenheim, who organized the exhibition of Still's work for the Art of this Century Gallery, was suspicious too:

> Miss Guggenheim questioned my willingness to let my work be written about in this historico-literary relationship. I agreed with her but chose to let the foreword stand as simply Rothko's personal way of expressing himself. I was naively indifferent to such tactics at that time. I had no intention of joining any group or cult or gallery -- so taking sides did not occur to me.[25]

Still's indifference quickly waned and was replaced by deadly seriousness and an obsessive attention to the remarks, whether published or distributed verbally, of others. Still's diaries and correspondence address manifold critiques and explanations of his own working process and the objects he produced. These self-reflections will be the subject of the next section; at present, let us take account of the ways Still was addressed by his contemporaries.

The otherwise comprehensive archive administered by the Clyfford Still Museum in Denver does not yet possess complete records of the reviews of Still's first painting shows. In 1939, Still showed his work at the WPA Spokane Art Center. Later in the same year, he and his professor and mentor Worth D. Griffin, were given a two-person exhibition at the Seattle Museum of Art.[26] In March of 1943, following these first endeavors in exhibition, Still earned a one-person show of his painting at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Many of the paintings in the exhibition retain traces and even complete demonstrations of figures (see Figure 12), and the work chosen for the gallery retains some traces of surrealist "distortion" of images (Figure 13). Along with several works in a regionalist style (Figures 14 and 15), and a self-portrait in spare color (Figure 16), Still included one advanced and pensive matte-black abstraction (Figure 17), now in the collection of the Clyfford Still Museum.[27]

Perhaps reactions to Still's first show in San Francisco were subdued or limited enough to fade into the past without memory (Still does not mention the show or reactions to it in his diaries and correspondence). The first showing of one of Still's paintings that does garner a reaction from his contemporaries came in 1945, when Peggy Guggenheim selected one of Still's matte-black paintings (known then as *The Spectre and the Perroquet*, Figure 18) for her Autumn Salon.[28] While recorded or published accounts of this show and, in particular, Still's painting within it are not known to exist, Still does record in his diaries the artist Andre Breton's affinity for his work. According to Still, Breton "refused to speak English but expressed interest in this black canvas." Breton also, during a visit to Still's studio with Guggenheim, "felt at a loss when he discovered that I had no titles on my pictures to give him a key to their meanings."[29]

Despite Still's cynicism toward Breton and "the Surrealist persuasion in either its theory or practice, especially its dialectical apologia and its political correlatives,"[30] Breton proved to be

one of Still's early champions. The elder artist makes it clear that Still's canvases are important, though for what reason is not recorded. The following February (1946), Guggenheim put on a one-man show of Still's works. Included were, according to Still, paintings that "make clear in small degree the evolution and invention basic to the purpose in my work as it moved toward clarification and intensification."[31] The paintings exhibited were created as early as 1940 and trace Still's development up until the first half of 1945, when he was painting and teaching in Richmond, Virginia.[32]

The works Still selected become more densely filled with paint the closer their creation date is to the exhibition. Early pictures, such as *PH-514* and *PH-535* (Figures 19 and 20, respectively)[33] establish these years as ones of prolific experimentation, especially with the color black. As Still practices, and as the years pass, oil or gouache on paper sketches like the aforementioned *PH-514* and *PH-535* give way to the suppression of contrasting elements through the use of a subdued palette of analogous earth-tones and black itself. *The Spectre and the Perroquet* (Figure 18) was shown again, along with larger and more denuded undertakings such as *PH-254* and *PH-354* (Figures 21 and 22, respectively).[34] These forms, many of which still denote aspects of Still's dematerializing, though stubborn figure, call our analysis back to Rothko's statement for the exhibition.

Rothko begins by drawing the reader's attention to the coincidence of Still arriving at "pictorial conclusions so allied to those of the small band of Myth Makers who have emerged here during the war."[35] "Here," as Rothko conceptualizes it, is the City of New York. Still's outsider status, having been born in North Dakota and raised beyond the Rockies in Washington state and Alberta, Canada, is mentioned time and time again as critics and historians from his own lifetime and from mine fixate on the imagery of the West as the source for Still's

distortions. In much of the work from The Art of This Century show, Still has done just that: distort. From where this imagery is drawn remains unclear, though Rothko's reduction to mythology as the source material of the abstractions does little more than establish his allegiance to his own theory.

The "pictorial conclusions" Rothko mentions must be the simple and roughly-hewn shapes Still scatters on the canvas. To Rothko, these actors "[extend] the Greek Persephone Myth" as "Every shape becomes an organic entity, inviting the multiplicity of associations inherent in all living things."[36] Without taking too much of an interpretive leap, perhaps Rothko also conceived of "myth" as a living being, not only changing throughout time and across cultures, but also giving shape to present-day ontologies. While I chafe at Rothko's simplification and insistence on finding a concrete referent that matches the narrative of form and line in Still's work, he concludes with a statement on Still's shapes—and the canvases in which they reside—articulate and nuanced enough to bolster the central argument for this section:

> To me they form a theogony of the most elementary consciousness, hardly aware of itself beyond the will to live - a profound and moving experience.[37]

Rothko and Gottlieb's letter to E.A. Jewell of the *New York Times*, published in June of 1943, states (after asserting the first three of their "esthetic beliefs"):

> 4. We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.[38]

It is true, as much as I can believe, that Still's canvases do "destroy illusion and reveal truth." My critique of the early conceptualizations of Still's works nevertheless indicates that his "form"

and its referent, and the relationship of distortion existing between the two, are not what "destroys illusion" or "reveals truth" in his art. Rather, Still's canvases most successfully accomplish these ends with the impalpability of matte black and the suppression of definite form. Rothko's confidence in his appropriation of Still's work provided numerous early critics with fodder to justify outright simplification of the artist's first exhibitions.

Jewell, whose review of Rothko and Gottlieb's work shown in the June 1943 exhibition of the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors inspired their seminal letter, leads the charge against Still's first show:

> Still, 'working out West and alone, has arrived at pictorial conclusions so allied to those of the small band of Myth Makers who have emerged here during the war.' The alliance may be deemed manifest, but the myths (large ones, hung at Art of This Century) are far too elusive to be read as one runs. I cross my fingers and back out.[39]

That Jewell concerns himself with "reading" the myths supposedly retained in Still's work best illustrates the perilous influence of Rothko's exhibition introduction. Jewell, as well as Judith Kaye Reed writing for *Art Digest*, quote directly from Rothko's critique. Reed writes, more sensitively:

> "To me they form a theogony of the most elemental consciousness, hardly aware of itself beyond the will to live - a profound and moving experience." [quoting Rothko]
>
> The dramas by Still are very large and pit attenuated forms against flat and molten mass in what may or may not be a moving experience for each observer. In *Buried Sun* he presents a primeval dream, the orange globe resting in dark caverns; *Jamais* suggests a raven-black bird pushing up against a flaming sun. *Quicksilver*, using a white-to-black palette, is a simple, striking impression of fleeting matter.[40]

Significantly, Reed mentions the artist's attention to black in each painting she addresses. Although fixated on what the objects may be behind Still's thinly veiled "dramas," Reed succeeds in evaluating the formal elements of the canvases that contribute to their success in "moving" an observer. Here, these elements are identified as flatness, mass, darkness, and contrast, qualities that will continue to factor into critiques of Still's works for the rest of his working life, and up to the present day.

An anonymous critic writing for *ARTnews* maintains the status quo in mentioning, "More than most abstractions, they [Clifford (sic) Still's paintings] retain the organic quality of the American West - the somber breath and heights of the Dakotas, Montana, Washington, where Still lived and taught."[41] Just as Rothko mentioned Still's biographical peculiarity in his introduction ("It is significant that Still, working out West, and alone [...]"[42]) critics at the time of Still's first exhibitions lean upon the artist's history as yet another object "distorted" by his vision. The subsequent section will parse out what moments in Still's biography were considered by him to have informed his own artistic practice, though at the time when critics were first addressing his abstraction, he had made no such confirmations or assertions with respect to his Western origins.

Fortunately, the anonymous *ARTnews* critic did not have the space to linger on biography, and instead accounts for the most salient of Still's formal developments:

> His shapes are sparse, ragged, and brooding; his colors muted and earthly. They are starkly juxtaposed. A painting may consist of merely a thread of white meandering over large patches of brown and black; a primaeval serpent-like figure looming in front of a stormy grey sky with a red sun. These pictures are queerly alive.[43]

The liveliness of Still's abstraction is a commonplace at this point in history.[44] In returning to these early accounts of his work as it was first displayed in New York galleries, the historian can see the evolution of vocabulary used to evaluate arrangements of paint on canvas, the likes of which had never been seen prior.

The word "monochrome" in relation to Still's work first appears the following year in another *ARTnews* review of Still's first show at Betty Parsons Gallery, the gallery that would represent the artist until he moved, briefly, to Sidney Janis Gallery in 1951.[45] The reviewer writes:

> He states he is preoccupied with the theme of the figure in landscape, with overtones of man's struggle against and fusing with nature. But, considering his extremely abstract style, this symbolism seems somewhat far fetched (sic). Brown, fragmented verticals stand against somber, monochrome backgrounds.[46]

I suspect that the statement to which the critic refers is Rothko's quotation of Still's description of his paintings as "of the Earth, the Damned, and of the Recreated."[47] Again, the ease of interpreting Still's work as symbolic or illustrative proves to distract from a phenomenological reading of the canvases. In the collection of the Clyfford Still Museum, only one of the paintings shown at Betty Parsons might justifiably be evaluated as an overall monochrome (*PH-300*, see Figure 23). While this painting was created after the work this analysis takes as Still's point of departure from referential "distortion" (the breakthrough monochrome *PH-235* from 1944, see Figure 1), *PH-235* was not shown outside of the confines of the Richmond Professional Institute (now Virginia Commonwealth University) until it was hung at LACMA in 1965.[48] Despite drawing readers' attention to monochromatic composition in Still's work, *PH-300* (the only "monochrome" from the exhibition) is ignored in all brief reviews from the time.[49]

Rather than continuing this litany of misunderstandings imposed upon Still's canvases, especially his early endeavors in suppressing contrast in his works,[50] an account of the perceptive critiques of Clement Greenberg will prove more instructive. His 1958 revision of "'American-Type' Painting" offers a sturdy and lasting account of Still's earliest shows. Here Greenberg identifies "an effort to repudiate value contrast as the basis of pictorial design" as "the most radical of all the phenomena of 'abstract expressionism' - and the most revolutionary move in painting since Mondrian."[51] Indeed, Greenberg sees the increased visibility of Still's work as part of a continuum of monochromatic abstraction, beginning with the turbulent canvases of J.M.W. Turner and continuing through Monet's late, vaporous water lilies (see Figure 6).

Just before delving into the expanding practice of suppressing value contrast—an analysis that begins with Still and ends with the painters Greenberg believes he influenced, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman—the critic mentions the long tradition of pictorial composition inextricably tied to the manipulation of value contrast toward illusionistic ends. Shading—the modeling of the forms of objects—produces animating, life-like gradation in color, situating the referents of realist painting within the correct amount of visibility dictated by the scene.[52] To a fault, Still retains some of these conventions in the work Greenberg saw displayed at Art of This Century in 1946 and at Betty Parsons in 1947 (Still notes in his diary that the critic "conspicuously ignored the work").[53]

Things changed for Greenberg in 1953. It was in this year that an unidentified canvas from 1948 established Still's work (in Greenberg's opinion) as powerful phenomenological stimuli, a body of art that resists any illusionistic depth beyond its immediate surfaces. The stakes of this revolution at the hands of Still and those he closely influenced lies in the creation of a painting that becomes what it purports to frame: paint on a canvas. This simple arrangement,

and its unity (the quality that determines its success as a phenomenological stimulus) pushes the experience of color—or in the case of Still's work, its absence—to the forefront of the very act of looking at the picture. To this end, Greenberg states:

> A new kind of flatness, one that breathes and pulsates, is the product of the darkened, value-muffling warmth of color in the paintings of Newman, Rothko, and Still. Broken by relatively few incidents of drawing or design, their surfaces exhale color with an enveloping effect that is enhanced by size itself.[54]

When definite image is abstracted beyond recognition—or for that matter never "exists" to begin with—what is it we see when we look at such a canvas? The simple answer is that we see the wavelengths of light reflected from (or absorbed by) the surface upon which we gaze. Our rods and cones take these varied wavelengths and process them into coherent images, conveyed by the visible spectrum of light. A slightly more complicated response is that we figure the images produced from reflected light through cultural and social conventions, paring down the cacophony of myriad stimuli into patterns that prove easier to read than the pulsating entirety of what our eyes can register.

Just before beginning the discussion of Monet's monochromatic canvases and Still's ascendance as arbiter of the changing conventions of painting, Greenberg mentions (succinctly) a most complicated response to the question of what we actually see. If no image or hint thereof exists initially in a field of stimuli, the viewer tends to generate his or her own image from the identifiable contrasts perceptible in any surface, no matter how uniform. "The eye takes its first bearing from quantitative differences of illumination, and in their absence feels most at a loss."[55] Evaluating Greenberg's sentiments in the direction of my own thesis, I believe that the critic is correct, though short-sighted, in assessing the scope of this fundamental process of vision. Our

eyes not only take their first bearing from quantitative differences of illumination, but also every subsequent bearing in every single instance of sight's operation.

The conventions through which we process these varied stimuli create the illusion of predictability and consistency. If sight is first initiated by recognizing and ascribing significance to differences in illumination (and therefore differences in the qualities wrought by illumination, be they form, texture, color, depth, etc.), then sight is in each instance reinvigorated through the same process. We take for granted the contrasts that we hold dear because to ruminate on them would be to lose oneself in infinite reflection. To stop and consider at every moment of sight the conventions of vision as arbitrary and dynamic is not to our species' evolutionary advantage. Our ancestors were better served by the ability to see, recognize, and act on the ascribed significances of patterns, rather than by reevaluating all visual stimuli as singular and unrepeatable.

Herein lies the phenomenological significance of Still's churning matte black canvases: the artist's single-minded insistence on suppressing value contrasts is most salient when all marks made by the trowel laden with paint verge on complete absence of color. Still's matte black, sooty and caked as it is, absorbs light as though swallowing it in its entirety. At first glance these works are barren; with consideration and attention, Still's black offers the minutest variation as of the utmost significance. Greenberg's writings on Still remain significant in part because the critic was able to successfully identify and give shape to what seeing is like when there is "nothing" to see.

With Greenberg's as the most lasting, and exhaustively cited, evaluations of Still's earliest breakthroughs, a few other critics fortify his statements and substantiate similar considerations. Thomas B. Hess, writing about Dorothy Miller's *15 Americans* exhibition of

1952 notes that, "In the pictures of Clyfford Still, the object is almost all idea."[56] Furthermore, Hess confidently notes that "the only possible tie between his image and the spectator's visual associations is the long, horizonless, 'egocentric' plains of the Midwest and West where Still grew up."[57] In contrast to the previously-cited reviews, Hess is allowed, or makes allowance for, a greater number of words to be expended directly on Still's work.[58] He does not linger on the associations between Still's distortions and their referents, but pushes further to note that Still concerns himself with his role "as a mediator between painting and idea [...] an idea of a sensation or response to mediation expressed with appropriate methods and intuition on the canvas' plane."[59] As in Greenberg's analysis, the plane of the canvas, its immediately available surface, becomes the site for an experience.

What that experience is Hess does not posit, at least not as confidently as Greenberg. He does note, however, that "One painting is almost black, with only a few streaks of red and blue. There is an immediacy and depth of impact which is astonishing."[60] Careful not to confuse *illusionistic* depth with "depth of impact," Hess notes the presence of a mysterious reaction, specifically one born out of observing Still's black canvases in implied motion.

Dore Ashton, writing in 1957, reiterates the basis for the formal developments of the avant-garde American painters: "To accommodate the feelings released by the acceptance of subjective content, painters had to find a new formal approach."[61] With subjectivity on the part of the painter and the observer firmly established, Ashton attends to Still's success at eliminating compositional and pictorial depth, replacing it with experience all but illusory:

> His [Still's] great asphalt black works are densely worked with the knife, spreading in terrifyingly vast plains until the finger-like breakthroughs of form give the eye a momentary shock of space memory. Like atomic radiation, these paintings absorb the

> breathing atmosphere, sucking the spectator into a darkness and light nightmare replete with perilous chasms and flashes of hell-fire light. They engage the eye in a journey which cannot be avoided, and in the time the eye must wander in the shuddering plain an emotion akin to anxiety and primordial fear is evinced.[62]

The intensity with which Ashton details her experience of what may seem to some a surface devoid of any content is unrivaled to this day. While the aloof Greenberg may have remained distant enough to link Still's canvases to the phenomenon of sight, Ashton admirably resigns herself to the experience sight evokes. Ashton's ekphrasis addresses Still's objects with prose that remains as unfixed as the paintings. For something to "engage the eye in a journey which cannot be avoided" may be too vaporous a claim to make in a post-formalist mode of criticism, to which Still's work is now subjected. While Ashton's account is utterly subjective, "objective" readings of Still's surfaces by contemporary scholars fall short of reproducing the whirl of indefinable image that manifests from a close look at what at first appears to be completely black.

At the risk of belaboring the point, this thesis represents an opportunity to restore the intensity with which Ashton was able to so succinctly get at the heart of Still's impact. While contemporary assessments of Still's works will be evaluated in the final section, their shortcomings are adumbrated in large part by the confident, though mistaken and over-simplified writings of ambitious critics, first among them Mark Rothko.

"A theogony of the most elemental consciousness…"

Current scholarship posits that faint quotations of the land and the body arise out of the consistent and single-minded motif of Still's abstraction. The textures wrought out of his

surfaces of thick impasto connote shifting sands, or deep crevasses in Western canyonlands. Some viewers perceive the surface of the human body, or its dark interior (a sentiment conceptualized by Thomas Hess after witnessing Still's "flayed" canvases shown in *15 Americans*).[63] Throughout Still scholarship, critics and historians have fixated on these connotations as though the land or the body forever remained as Still's subject matter and image.[64]

Still's abstract oeuvre (in opposition to his early, figurative work, see Figures 12 and 15) has often fallen victim to interpretations fixated on the idea of their surfaces as denotative of physical matter, namely abstracted landscapes or human anatomy.[65] While these analyses are important markers in the expanding depth of Still literature, they burden, if not overwhelm the object of their analysis with notions of political or social import. Political and social consequences of the mistaken apprehension of his canvases were at the forefront of Still's mind as he documented the progress of his work in his diaries and correspondence. In 1958, he states: "I am not illustrating my time. My problem has been to break through it -- the whole culture -- religion, philosophy, all the collectives."[66] Well after this statement, and several years past the scope of this thesis, Still reiterated in the catalogue for his 1976 San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "I am not interested in illustrating my time. A man's 'time' limits him, it does not truly liberate him."[67] Perhaps the same sentiment could be extended to the ego-syntonic criticism of Still's work that takes as its foundation notions of current events and their bearing on how we make sense of the past.

In the case of Still's statements, I am inclined to trust the artist, at least as far as he represents a lifetime of thought and consideration toward the legacy of his own art. Still seems to have been the best scholar of his own work. Perhaps one day a thinker will emerge with more

intimate knowledge of these objects; until then, this analysis takes Still's thoughts as seriously as the artist himself did.

Looking back on the works shown at the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, Still warned in a letter to the director, Gordon Smith, of the potential that the paintings possess. "Let no man under-value the implications of this work or its power for life; - or for death, if it is misused."[68] Two words require definition as they relate to Still's conception of his own work: *implication* and *misuse*. The implication, the conclusion to be drawn from Still's canvases (among those displayed at the Albright Art Gallery, several exceptional and early matte black works, see Figures 24 and 25) without being explicitly stated, will never be determined with any universal certainty. Rather, viewers take from an experience of Still's work all that they allow themselves to see and feel. Thus, their misuse, in this case their suffocation or extinguishment, comes from definitive conclusions and concrete associations haphazardly foisted upon difficult abstraction.

Since Still did write so extensively and sensitively about his own work, it is prudent to consult his records for information pertinent to the creation of these matte black canvases. These above other works are paradigmatic of Still's concern for sight, and of his insistence on letting these works expand to their full potential in the minds of those who search them as they search the world: for differentiating contrast, the quality that gives rise to all we see.

Chapter 2: Still's Theory and Practice

"The Vision of Christ that thou dost see

Is my Vision's Greatest Enemy:

Thine has a great hook nose like thine,

Mine has a snub nose like to mine:

Thine is the Friend of all Mankind,

Mine speaks in parables to the Blind:

Thine loves the same world that mine hates,

Thy Heaven doors are my Hell Gates."[69]

- William Blake

"I did not make my pictures with the idea that they were to be interpreted. I did not make them to solicit the public. They were my way of realizing to myself, developing my own insights, my understandings, imaging my meanings, my feelings. In them I spoke as clearly as can be spoken about what I was, what I was doing."[70]

- Clyfford Still

Clyfford Still's legacy—as a painter, a philosopher, a historian, and a critic—rests soundly in his grasp. Since the selection of the city of Denver as the site of The Clyfford Still Museum in 2004, and since the opening of the Museum in 2011, Still's archive has been made available as never before. This thesis is a product of access to Still's complete personal library, in addition to the records of his diaries and correspondence dating from 1934 until his death in 1980. These records, even when evaluated in the context of the 3,125 works (95% of the artist's

output),[71] cannot construct an accurate idea of who Clyfford Still was. Still's legacy and the paintings that comprise it were maintained and protected closely lest it be violated with words. The artist did everything he could to avoid leading readers away from visual experience; the history he left is as impenetrable as his abstraction.

The task of this thesis, a concise and focused endeavor into only a select five of Still's most evocative and enticing paintings, is to evaluate the degree to which Still conceptualized the phenomenological impact of his works, and the tenacity with which he prioritized experience. I argue that the phenomenological interaction with Still's abstract surfaces was an object of intense thought and study for the artist, as evidenced through the archives now housed in Denver. The following section will illuminate the recorded details of Still's own philosophy, developed out of decades of study (and at several points teaching) as well as through correspondence and personal rumination. The final section of this thesis will take as its point of departure the ideas Still held in serious consideration, and the avenues through which his thoughts enliven his painting.

"The instrument" of Painting

One of Still's earliest recorded diary entries introduces the reader to his concept of the "instrument" of painting. Reflecting on his time spent at the Trask Foundation in upstate New York, where he studied and painted in the summers of 1934 and 1935, Still writes:

> I was able to collect my resources and begin an intense probing of the potential of the instrument I had intuitively chosen as an open means in a field of closed alternatives. From then on, I realized I would have to paint my way out of the classical European heritage. [...] One had to use the instrument - make it an organic part of one's being - to

unlock the future use of its intensity and its untouched potential as a medium. Not for exploitation, but as realization, if you will, of a creative identity. And so make it live.[72]

Still, in his earliest writings, conceptualizes painting not as a process for creating a static picture, but rather an instrument that heightens consciousness and generates personal insight. The "instrument" that Still conceives as personal in its creation must therefore be personal in its apprehension, rather than eliciting one universal reaction from all its audience. The relationship between Still's personal methods for self-realization, and the public's puzzlement over paintings that resulted, is a sticky paradox. Viewers are inclined to consult the artist for details on "how" they ought to react or reflect on the images Still has created. Given Still's obstinate refusal to tie his works to the time and place in which they were created, critics turned to the distant past and even to Still's own history to provide referents for the abstractions.

Still's writing turns the viewer back to his work, though he eloquently conceives of his work as the embodiment of his intentions. These intentions revolve around facilitating an experience for the viewer; the task at hand in this section is to provide historical grounding for the experience that I have had in front of Still's works, namely his matte black paintings. I accept that this endeavor may amount to nothing more than a personal reflection of my own, though perhaps it is through this instrument of reception that scholars can best understand Clyfford Still's (and his paintings') positions in the past and the present.

Early in his career as an artist, Still taught painting and the history of art at Washington State College in Pullman, Washington. By the time of his departure from the university in 1941, Still had earned the position of Assistant Professor of Fine Art, and was responsible for the curricula pertaining to the history of art, drawing, mural painting, and most importantly for this

analysis, esthetics.[73] Still's position at Washington State allowed him to study and profess philosophy as he saw it best related to and strengthened the instrument of painting. His students described him as patient and supportive of their understanding that the creation of art was the satisfaction of individual ideas.[74] Included in the archives of the Clyfford Still Museum is one folder containing lesson plans and research used to conduct a class in vision and the arts. To quote from Still's Teaching Objectives:

> The course has for its ultimate objective the stimulation of a live interest in the arts, so that the student may know what the arts are, how they may be perceived and evaluated (emotionally and intellectually), and their various uses to human beings.[75]

In this general comment, Still furthers his position as a painter of live experience, and an advocate of painting as a living entity. In the notes written for this class, Still pays close attention to the dynamic but inconclusive theories of vision, as well as to the physiology of the eye itself. With this detail, he seems to assert that the paintings themselves become "alive" when activated by sight, and that the viewer in turn derives living, rather than entombed, insight from their appreciation.

The word "instrument" implies some degree of usefulness - a tool suited for a specific purpose. Still addresses the "relations between functions and forms" further along in the lesson plans:

> The causes for the existence of an art form are to be found in the nature of the services that the form renders to man. Knowledge of the usefulness of a thing is meaningful knowledge hence the emphasis is placed on various functional causes. These are analyzed by scientific study, going to the art products themselves, to the behavior of man in his

> productions of these forms, and to his responses in terms of satisfactions or dissatisfactions with these forms.[76]

The previous section familiarized the reader with the accounts of Abstract Expressionist ethos offered by Dore Ashton, Clement Greenberg, and Irving Sandler. In response, let us acknowledge again that the "service" rendered by Still's painting is not one of illusionistic representation. Rather, the "usefulness" of Still's paintings (to again use his word) is as stimuli for the contemplation of the spectator. In this contemplation, the spectator becomes the subject of the interaction: viewers become represented to themselves.

Still wrote explicitly about this inevitable confrontation, particularly in light of the pleasure the attendees of his 1947 exhibition at the Legion of Honor Museum in San Francisco expressed upon seeing his solemn paintings. This early and "most fatal success"[77] provided the stage for an audience to boldly ignore the intentions with which Still created works such as *PH-217* (Figure 26) and *PH-220* (Figure 27). Still details his experience viewing his audience slip into conventional modes of analysis:

> A spectator viewing them sees a "picture" after the first shock of their import. Thus of necessity does he reduce the work to the conventions he associates through training with what he sees. Or by mere demand of ego is he compelled to measure to receive (sic) on terms not too unequal or varied from the concepts by which he lives. Adjustment, acceptance, to fit all received into the pattern of his existence is almost a condition of his survival.[78]

Here Still echoes the plight of those who attempt, and fail, to see differently from what their conditioning has reinforced. The above statement underscores the gravity with which Still held his own thoughts, and the seriousness with which he undertook developing a completely new

instrument of revelation for a public deprived of the opportunity to reflect. These canvases, while not explicitly referential or distorted from a tangible source, nevertheless retain forms reminiscent of Surrealist automatism. Three years before the creation of the starkest abstraction in the show, *PH-220* (see Figure 27), Still painted the void *PH-235* from 1944 (Figure 1). As stated in the previous section, he did not exhibit this painting outside of Richmond, Virginia until 1965, when it was hung at LACMA. Why Still waited to reveal instances of his advanced, and highly nuanced painting until after airing early attempts at pure abstraction is unclear. Always the historian, perhaps Still manipulated his own chronology to evidence grand strides in Color Field innovation during a time when other Abstract Expressionists could still be said to be "action painters," in the words of Harold Rosenberg,[79] or "myth-makers," to invoke Rothko's early terminology.

When Still did show a large-scale matte-black painting, *1951-52* (Figure 28) at Dorothy Miller's *15 Americans*, the work drew, though did not sustain, the attention of the Museum of Modern Art. Still writes in his diary that MoMA's eventual refusal of the painting was on the grounds of its "[stating] most clearly the separation of the European hegemony and limits as revealed in Picasso's Guernica (sic)."[80] Such a forthright break in tradition was, to Still's chagrin, antithetical to MoMA's institutional character, which Still labels "fascist, ruthless, and mean beneath contempt."[81] Implicit in Still's identification of what he saw as cowardice on the part of the Museum of Modern Art is his faith in the potential of his own work.

As it hung on the walls of a collector, Still notes that *1951-52* "failed to work the humanitarian spirit with which I thought it was full."[82] The "humanitarian spirit" with which (in Still's opinion) his canvases were imbued is evidenced in his statement for the *15 Americans* catalogue:

> That pigment on canvas has a way of initiating conventional reactions for most people needs no reminder. Behind these reactions is a body of history matured into dogma, authority, tradition. The totalitarian hegemony of this tradition I despise, its presumptions I reject.
>
> [...]
>
> Demands for communication are both presumptuous and irrelevant. The observer usually will see what his fears and hopes and learning teach him to see. But if he can escape these demands that hold up a mirror to himself, then perhaps some of the implications of the work may be felt. But whatever is seen or felt it should be remembered that for me these paintings had to be something else. It is the price one has to pay for clarity when one's means are honored only as an instrument of seduction or assault.[83]

Still foreshadows the ideas of the ever-present critic Clement Greenberg as represented in his 1962 "After Abstract Expressionism."[84] Before analyzing the later situation of the movement that Greenberg gained so much notoriety for supporting—in many ways already something in history, as the critic's title implies—there is his earlier essay to consider, "'American-type' Painting" from 1955. Regarding this particular illumination of changing practice in the hands of the New York School, Still states, "There is just enough truth in it to make me totally helpless to fight it effectively for some time."[85] Still explicates his reaction to the essay, one of the most cited and analyzed writings in the discourse of modern and contemporary art, in a letter to the author only months after "'American-type' Painting" was first published. In a diary entry, Still writes that Greenberg "misread my letter to him most effectively to destroy whatever rigor I tried to establish."[86]

Still's objections are validated throughout Greenberg's treatment of Still's position in the movement from which he so adamantly divorced himself. It is possible to discern some of Greenberg's misunderstanding in the comparison of Still to Monet:

> Can it be suggested that the public's appetite for close-valued painting as manifested in both Turner's and Monet's cases, and in that of late Impressionism in general, meant the emergence of a new kind of taste which, though running counter to the high traditions of our art and possessed by people with little grasp of these, yet expressed a genuine underground change in European sensibility? If so, it would clear up the paradox that lies in the fact that an art like the late Monet's, which in its time pleased banal taste and still makes most of the avant-garde shudder, should suddenly stand forth as more advanced in some respects than Cubism.[87]

The expanding taste of the public, no matter how "new," would never have been the reason for Still's suppression of value contrasts. Indeed, much of the trouble Greenberg encounters, according to Still, has to do with where Still received his inspiration. The pictures garnered praise in Greenberg's writing, as does Still ("perhaps the most original of all painters under fifty-five, if not the best"[88]). However, Greenberg lingers on Still's supposedly unrefined regionalist sensibilities as the source of the primary look of his paintings.

What seems to gall Still about Greenberg's writing is not misinterpretation or misguided appropriation of the paintings he had completed, but Greenberg's insistence on constructing a pedantic vision of Still's relationship to the other artists of the New York School. In his letter to Greenberg, Still states:

> After taking the venom of Barnett Newman's jealousy for over two hours yesterday afternoon, it required some considerable control to see your last effort in an objective light.
>
> [...]
>
> I am not going to discuss your article here except to say that I think you are a completely honest man (a very rare person in these times), that you said many right and pertinent things about my work, eg., the assault on Cubist unities, the handling of "edges", the subordination of taste, value contrasts, and the character of my influence and ideas on the art world today. Unfortunately, also, you set me up as a target a few times, eg. "buckeye", in a way that will make life pretty nasty socially for some time, and which for yourself may negate the public effort you seem to be making in the name of "American Type" painting. This latter fact is the reason for this note.[89]

Still could have been bristling at the fact that those who seek to establish art movements rarely consult whole-heartedly with those they seek to categorize. This was especially the situation of the Abstract Expressionists, who simultaneously deigned inclusion under broad strokes or protested their exclusion from the categories once in place. While Greenberg has done Still's work justice in the artist's opinion, the means through which the critic established Still's impact was objectionable from a social, and to some extent moral, standpoint. To Still, the means through which he achieved his insight into the instrument of painting were as important as his continued use of the instrument; to speciously set Still as the "teacher" of Abstract Expressionism's methods makes the artist an enemy of individuality—a pedant dictating the development of other artists in the movement.

Still continues in his letter: "It seems to be a consistent paradox of human frailty that those who owe the most to another in the realm of the fine arts are those who will most deeply resent and deny the debt."[90] Still was by no means a blank slate in terms of sources. What the artist did take from his sources, be they painterly early Modernists such as Georges Rouault or Oskar Kokoschka (both of whose catalogues he collected in his personal library), or the Cubists and Surrealists whom he studied and taught (and largely objected), Still made them his own through the instrument he had so closely overseen. When influence, inspiration, or hierarchy is established amongst living artists, however, the comment that one artist taught the other is a high-stakes claim, if only because there are voices still present to object.

As unintentional as it may have been, Greenberg was guilty of fomenting resentment at several turns in the original, unrevised, "'American-Type' Painting" (1955). One such instance Still mentions by name—Greenberg's appraisal of "buckeye" art, which seems to have been especially grating as it implies a degree of frivolity and lack of serious consideration. (Greenberg adds that "buckeye" landscape paintings are available for purchase "around Washington Square and in Greenwich Village restaurants."[91]) In 1958, Greenberg shortened his description of this style in the revised version of "'American-type' Painting," but the first draft of the essay was the target of Still's objections. The critic identifies Still as the first painter to successfully translate "buckeye" principles into "serious art."[92] This is seen in Still's gritty impasto surfaces and "in the uniformly dark heat of his colors"[93]—all directed at reducing illusionism and natural referents in his work.

In this first version of his essay, Greenberg is never specific about what "buckeye" painting is, other than to say that Still's adoption of its principles has been successful. In his revision of the essay, he identifies "buckeye" as "open-air painting in autumnal colors"[94] and

"demotic-Impressionist."[95] It may be that Still regarded Greenberg's interpretation of his style ("buckeye painter") as a willful misinterpretation because of the association of this term with art that is uninitiated, easily replicable, and naïve.[96]

This last adjective, *naïve*, seems to be the primary cause of Still's dismay with Greenberg's careless hierarchy. By 1962, when Greenberg wrote "After Abstract Expressionism," the fact that the members of the New York School where anything but solitary, untutored, and spontaneous was a commonplace realization.[97] The false impression of spontaneity is a central dictate of Greenberg's text: the careful handling of paint on the surface of canvases, the "consideredness"[98] of Still, Newman, and Rothko is what sets them apart. Seven years before "After Abstract Expressionism," Still already insisted on his, and his colleagues', debts to each other.

Returning to Still's thoughts in his letter to Greenberg, where he addresses the short-sightedness of "'American-Type' Painting,":

> It seems to be a consistent paradox of human frailty that those who owe the most to another in the realm of the fine arts are those who will most deeply resent and deny the debt. Especially does this seem imperative when the matter is an intangible issue, and it is infinitely multiplied when the debtor is encouraged to walk on his own feet or find his own resolution. [...] Inevitably I had to violate the expectations or demands of others in painting. It was done consciously and with high purpose. And the results? - I fought for freedom to build an unlimited and ennobling instrument; I found that my colleagues only wanted to seize its incidental factors to build themselves classical jails.[99]

So strong was Still's desire to remain free from these classical confines that he requests "that before you take farther into your confidence, in regard to me, any of the men who have presumed

to educate you or speak for me or my work, you check their evidence, definitions, analyses, or terminology, especially where equivocal idioms are used, with me?"[100] Still insists on a standardization of vocabulary, especially as it relates to the study of philosophy and technique that has gone into the development of his instrument, indicating the intensity with which he considered words, written or spoken either by himself or by critics and scholars.

As critics and historians conceived Abstract Expressionist and Color Field painting as vehicles for the ineffable, language and image opposed each other more intensely than ever before. Well before the conception of Color Field artwork, postwar critics such as Dore Ashton noted Romantic ideals bearing similarity to the ethos of this new generation of New York School painters.[101] Some critics, such as Lawrence Alloway[102] and Robert Rosenblum[103] drew out the term "sublime" to describe the interaction between viewer and artwork, the implication being that these abstract works rivaled awe-inspiring natural phenomena.

The metaphor of language and its use to conceptualize the act of seeing one of Still's matte black paintings (read an "intangible issue"[104] according to the artist) was an object of great concern to Still. This open indeterminacy is what Greenberg designated as the strength of the "new" Abstract Expressionist style. By 1962, Greenberg was ready to admit that the lack of fixity in Color Field painting derived its impacts from the "conceptions"[105] the artist had in place at the time he created the work.

This fact led some viewers to state that *they* or their child could successfully execute a Newman, or a Rothko, or a Still painting. Greenberg acknowledges that this could be the case, but that "Newman would have to be there to tell the child *exactly* what to do."[106] In 1955, Still already asserts this to be the case for his painting. The artist's objection predates Greenberg's understanding of "conception" as already activated by "one of the most important and original

painters of our time,"[107] the designation he applies to Still. I believe that Still's matte black works (see Figures 1-5) are the most successful embodiment of the artist's "conceptions."

We return to a paradigmatic work already eleven years old at the time of Greenberg's first publication of "'American-Type' Painting"—Still's 1944 *PH-235*. This painting is held in the collection of the Clyfford Still Museum, while its counterpart and replica, *1944-N No. 2* is housed at MoMA.[108] Despite Greenberg's appraisal of Still as a painter of dark, monochrome canvases, it remains unclear which paintings the critic is specifically referencing. It is possible, however, that Greenberg could have seen either *PH-235* or another of the barren matte black monochromes in the artist's studio. By 1955, Greenberg could have also seen *PH-108*, *PH-241*, and *PH-1106*.

In the absence of a definite referent for Greenberg's criticism (other than the whole of Still's painting available to him from their first introduction in 1945[109]), I take the matte black works selected for this analysis as possessing the characteristics that are most salient in relation to the phenomenological impact described by Greenberg, an articulate conduit for their experience.

Greenberg concludes "After Abstract Expressionism" with a summary of the stakes of Still, Newman, and Rothko's innovations in painting. To simplify, the success of these pictures lies in the total control, and the individual conception, exerted over them by their artists. Once in place, Still's canvases then exert their effects individually each time they are registered in a viewer's field of vision. The effects of these paintings remain within the bounds of Still's practice yet are likely to be separated from his conception as they are apprehended by a diverse public. This situation seems to have been the site of particular liability to Still. It calls for today's

scholar to consult his writings as central to the production of his paintings, while in past cases a critic or scholar may have ignored the overt intentions of the artist.

Still remains the most productive theorist of his own work; much of his writing turns the reader back to the painting and inward. Still's theories are neither far-fetched nor idealistic, failing to match the forms he has created. Rather, in writing, Still's confidence in the strength of his paintings, and his insistence on experience taking precedence over thought, mirror his practice of imbuing his canvases with perceptual vastness—phenomenological liberty.

"The poets' words…"

As stated previously, the word many theorists, critics, and even Still himself have been indirectly referencing throughout their writings from this era is "sublime." Those critics who directly reference the sublime in an American context, Alloway and Rosenblum, used the term beginning in the 1960s (later than the scope of this investigation). However, Barnett Newman published his article "The Sublime is Now" in 1948, after having been instructed on Longinus by Clyfford Still. Still does admit to teaching Newman, in this particular case; he also writes in his diary that, in his opinion, Newman misunderstood Longinus (Still's preferred theorist of the sublime). Newman and Still's difference in opinion about Longinus's conceptions of the sublime seem to center on Still's continued refusal to limit his work, whether it be painting or writing, to temporal or social concerns. Newman, alternatively, seems intent on bolstering the political and social implications of his painting.

The word "sublime" carries with it several connotations, the most common of which centers on unfathomability and elevation of thought. This elevation of thought occurs to an

extent that our ability as rational thinkers conflicts with our ability to represent what we can imagine.

Another connotation of "sublime" is one of modification or redirection—as in to sublimate a cultural mode. Both senses of the word apply to Clyfford Still's painting. The Kantian sublime, though a relatively recent articulation of the phenomenon, serves as an eloquently-stated and consistent account. Most relevant to my analysis of the sublime as it relates to or falls short in adequately describing the effects of Still's paintings is the insistence on Kant's part that no form or object "contains" the sublime. Rather, feelings of sublimity are occasioned by the experience of certain stimuli—Kant names "the gloomy, raging sea" and "boundless," "formless" objects or conditions as examples.[110] For this reason, Kant's sublime remains a strong counterpart to phenomenological analysis of works of art.

Despite the popularity and persistence of Kant's theories of the sublime in contemporary scholarship, Still makes no direct reference to the philosopher in his diaries or correspondence. The philosopher whose theories most appealed to Still, according to the personal records he kept, was the first theorist of the sublime: Longinus. We can assume that Still was familiar with prevailing conceptions of the sublime from his teaching experience at Washington State College (where he was made assistant professor in 1941, responsible for teaching, among others, courses in esthetics).[111] Collected within Still's personal library are such volumes as a heavily-annotated copy of *A Modern Book of Esthetics: An Anthology* (1938) and *The Story of Philosophy: The Lives and Opinions of the Greater Philosophers* (1927).

In addition to these, Still retained two copies of texts containing Longinus's *On the Sublime*. The earliest edition, collected in Charles Sears Baldwin's *Aristotle's* Poetics: *Longinus* On the Sublime (1930), is heavily annotated and therefore essential in parsing out which ideas

from the text appealed to Still.[112] Longinus, which is the name scholars have given to the anonymous Roman-era Greek who penned *On the Sublime*, focuses on the rhetorical conventions of the time and how they might be used to "enthrall"[113] an audience. Despite this seeming shortfall of relevance for a painter intent on silence in the apprehension of his painting, Longinus's resonance with Still is underscored, quite literally, by enthusiastic exclamation points, checks, and marginalia penciled in beside the philosopher's segment on images as vehicles for the sublime. Longinus writes:

> Images, moreover, contribute greatly, my young friend, to dignity, elevation, and power as a pleader. In this sense some call them mental representations. In a general way the name of *image* or *imagination* is applied to every idea of the mind, in whatever form it presents itself, which gives birth to speech. [...] Further, you will be aware of the fact that an image has one purpose with the orators and another with the poets, and that the design of the poetical image is enthrallment; of the rhetorical, vivid description.[114]

To *enthrall* is to capture the fascinated attention of a spectator. In Longinus's account of the intersection of images and words—two entities uniquely at play in conceptions of the sublime—Still's matte black painting assuredly rests within the bounds of "poetical image." Still's surfaces, monochrome, without illusionistic depth, straightforward and stark, enthrall my looking. The amount of detail distinguishable on these surfaces which are at first glance barren of variation approaches infinite indiscernibility. Words consistently fall short of adequately representing the experience of searching a matte black surface for the details of a resolved image; without any identifiable referent, the phenomenological and "poetical" take command over the vivid "rhetorical."

In the second copy of Longinus that Still owned, the artist made explicit note of the writer's definition of sublimity—that its condition elevates the mind, and that "sublimity is the echo of a great soul."[115] This sentiment is mirrored in a nearly identical diary entry from 1950, in which Still writes about his painting *1950-A-No.2*, now in the collection of the Hirshhorn Museum (Figure 29). "I chose that my art be engaged in that which exalts the spirit of man,"[116] Still begins. He then warns viewers that "To memorialize in the instruments of art the banal attritions of daily experience that are common to nearly every individual, appears to me to be of small virtue."[117] Here Still seems to restate his position that he is not depicting or illustrating his time, no matter how abstract or formless the time and place might be. In essence, the uncertain period of social and cultural development in the 1950s and 1960s United States is not his canvases' referent. His paintings do not memorialize the degradation of the individual, but instead stimulate solitary introspection—a "humanitarian" undertaking nevertheless.

Still's paintings do not stand in for another entity. He states as early as 1946: "it is only when man can break through his symbol-making proclivity, his simple impulse to make something which stands for something else, that he moves in harmony with a creative act. The rest is an escape. An abstraction of it. A negation."[118] Here the artist continues succinctly disassembling the ideas that Rothko and Gottlieb put forth regarding the "distortion" of signs. While his early work may have retained some of these distorted referents, as Greenberg noted, his matte black work beginning as early as 1944 (see Figure 1) divorces itself conscientiously from reference to the external world. Still continues:

> It is here that the burden of the symbols of a culture, and the deeper forms of a culture as expressed by the artist men who create the only interesting things in a culture, bear dangerous fruit. Several of my colleagues show tragic evidence of the power of confusion

> in these matters. One uses an imagery moving tragically through the birth forms of monsters contemporary to our mood only to sweeten the whole with a Venetian lemon and lime, and throw in a few scraggly lines from a design problem without meaning or feeling but to fill up a thoughtless gap in the canvas. Another, blending an imagery of line figures floats the whole in a harmony of Matissian subtilty til (sic) the picture gives evidence of brilliant synthesis of -- nothing.[119]

Although Still's matte black work appears as a void, the artist never claims to have synthesized anything, as if in an act of annihilation or mystification. The suppression of form, through the diminishing of value contrasts composing the surface of these paintings, gives rise to ethereality and vacancy that cannot be tied to symbol or sign as these forms never resolve into anything definitive. We return, rhetorically as well as thematically, to Longinus's description of the mental image. If Still's paintings are guilty of any reference, it is to nothingness, as there exists no illusionistic depth beyond the matte surface, which consummately absorbs light.

Facing one of Still's paintings, I am left to ponder the mental image of nothingness. As I apprehend more and more variation on the surface of one of these select masterpieces, the contrast gives no definition of any tangible referent other than perhaps the experience of seeing itself. This may be a foregone or commonplace conclusion, though in abstract work of this degree of removal from the world of signs, the conclusion is felt more than known. It seems that Still is getting at something preceding the conventions and patterns we learn after developing the capacity to take part in the world of experience. In 1944, near the time of his having painted *PH-235* (Figure 1) while teaching at what is now Virginia Commonwealth University, he states: "One simply tries to remove the load of educational negations which inhibit a student's mind, so that he may comprehend or come in contact with the forces he has within him."[120] He continues:

"I want my work to be competent [...] The colors, the shapes, the lines, the textures, I want to speak as directly, as simply, as honestly as I can make them."[121]

Only a year later, Still provides the reader of his diaries with a diatribe against academism and certainty, given the imperfection of words:

> I deplore most the overemphasis on words. Not the poets' words, but words that explain, reason, debate, deduce, make "fact". […] From the state of the weather to an interpretation of the picture, words bear the burden of our stuttering life. A substitute for thinking, a substitute for seeing, a substitute even for listening and smelling and copulating, words do a remarkable job of miscreating and aborting experience and understanding.[122]

With this section, I have provided the basis for and substantiated the plausibility of a hypothesis I will develop in the subsequent section. Although Still detested words, I hope that the reader has not yet come to distrust them as the artist did. Returning to Still's conception of an experience without words, and Longinus's treatise on the sublimity of the mental image, I propose a way out of the impasse formed when scholars, including myself, attempt to explicate Still's art in the face of its unfathomable depths of matte black.

Chapter 3: Present-Day Reflections

"The entire meaning of Still as an agent of culture may be in his work, and the meaning of the work resides in the bearing of the mark. This mark, I like to think, is anonymous and inexpressive. To say that it's Still's mark does not tell us what it is. Does it conceal some truth? - no, it's neither more nor less than what we see."[123] - Richard Shiff, 2013

"I feel that the easiest way to miss the entire import of my work is to conceive of it as in some way illustrative of, or a product of, environment. As for seeing spaces, or bigness, or depth, or objects, or images, and seeking convenient crutches of association, I find it the commonest of games and as banal as it is inaccurate in its various conclusions."[124] - Clyfford Still, 1952

Throughout the course of his life Clyfford Still collected hundreds of books, most pertaining to visual art. His interests within this subject varied enormously, evidenced by Matisse's exhibition catalogues and general histories of the arts of ancient Egypt and the Old Masters, to name only a few examples. Furthermore, Still made it a point to retain catalogues and other texts featuring his contemporaries' works, as well as his own. One such text within Still's personal library is *Man and His Images*, a rumination on the history of visual signs by critic and art consultant Georgine Oeri. The text begins with the following statement:

> Among the things we take for granted is the fact that we see. It is generally taken for granted, in fact, that there is just one way of seeing, the natural one. Yet not only our ability to see, but also the quality, the mode of our seeing is conditioned by our training, and by cultural patterns.[125]

To take something *for granted* implies that an individual, a phenomenon, or an object itself will not change, or if it does, it will do so at the will of the perceiving subject. When I take an idea for granted, I tend to erroneously believe that the thought had always been in place, or that it is only variable when *I* wish it to be. As perceiving subjects, we take sight for granted during the course of our day-to-day lives, as patterns take hold of our vision and create the illusion of predictability.

As I conveyed in the previous sections, critics writing about Clyfford Still during the 1940s and 1950s expressed surprise in the way Still's painting called into question the conventions of vision. Some critics, among them Edward Alden Jewell, remarked that the novelty of looking at one of Still's works detracted from its clarity, stating "the myths (large ones, hung at Art of This Century) are far too elusive to be read as one runs."[126] The elusive nature of Still's paintings is precisely what attracts me to them today. Jewell, to give only one example of a critic challenged by the absence of definition in Still's work, seems to have taken for granted his way of seeing as the proper one.

Although Clement Greenberg misunderstood some facets of the development of Still's instrument of painting, his writing reveals an undercurrent of concern for the dynamic standards and conventions of vision. Greenberg stated in the first edition of his essay "'American-Type' Painting":

> The eye automatically orients itself by the value contrasts in dealing with an object that is presented to it as a picture, and in the absence of such contrasts it tends to feel almost, if not quite as much, at loss (sic) as in the absence of a recognizable image.[127]

This sentiment is representative of critics' changing notions of what makes a painting complete or "possible," to use Greenberg's term.[128] Greenberg honed the ideas outlined in "'American-

Type' Painting," regarding sight and its bearing on Clyfford Still's monochrome canvases, in an earlier, general essay, "Abstract and Representational."[129] In this text, the critic does not mention Still by name, though he does insert an image of one of Still's works at the beginning of the article.

The position of Still's painting at the beginning of Greenberg's description of the new direction of American art seems to illustrate its status as a catalyst in the reaction between audience and abstraction. The critic defends challenging abstractions (such as Still's) as equally salient and important as representational pictures and deserving of more respectful criticism. Incidentally, Greenberg also notes an element of viewership taken for granted by him and his peers:

> It is granted that a recognizable image will add anecdotal, historical, psychological, or topographical meaning. But to fuse it into aesthetic meaning is something else; that a painting gives us things to recognize and identify in addition to a complex of colors and shapes to feel does not mean invariably that it gives us more as art. More and less in art do not depend on how many different categories of significance we apprehend, but on how intensely and largely we feel the *art*—and what that consists in we are never able to define with real precision.[130]

Still disapproved of Greenberg's appropriating his painting to illustrate a point, especially one so grounded in the critic's time and place. Despite the artist's objections, "Abstract and Representational" illuminates ambiguities of vision as a central facet of viewership. Since so many of the expectations of painting were changing at this moment—a fact perhaps taken for granted by Still himself, who was responsible in part for these innovations—Greenberg's writing

proves to be a valuable source for details regarding this evolution. Greenberg continues in "Abstract and Representational":

> It may be that, having only immediate experience to go by, we cannot yet see sufficiently around the art of our day to recognize that the abandonment of the representational has little to do, strictly, with the dissatisfaction we feel with contemporary abstract art. This dissatisfaction may be due mainly to our tardiness in getting used to a new language of painting.
>
> [...]
>
> What saddens our eyes is not so much the absence or mutilation of the image, but the deprivation it has suffered of those spatial rights it used to enjoy back when the painter was obliged to create an illusion of the same kind of space as that in which our bodies move. It is this illusion and its space that we may miss even more than the things, as such, that filled it.[131]

Greenberg indicates that the most abstract painting of the time is less focused on the representation of particular objects and more focused on illuminating what the viewer has always brought to the experience of painting. One such convention brought to bear on painting viewership is the expectation that the artist is creating the illusion of space within his or her canvas. At the time Greenberg was writing, this depth moved steadily closer to the front of the canvas plane, altogether disappearing in the flat monochromes Still created. This elimination of illusion reveals visual conventions to be as arbitrary as painted simulations.

Still did not enumerate his objections to "Abstract and Representational" in a letter, as he did upon the publication of "'American-Type' Painting." However, it is possible to discern many

of the artist's objections to the changing standards of abstract and representational art in diary entries regarding a conversation between Still and Harold Rosenberg. In his notes Still states:

> This act of painting - direct, of some energy, so useless and therefore so meaningful! So devoid of the old obsessions apparently, so immediate as to ask nothing and demand everything from the spectator - until the old remembrances were called up and references applied.
>
> [...]
>
> Total understanding and comprehension of what one was about and his relation to and use of the forces outside cultural and knowledge hypothesis were neither tenable nor admissable (sic). That I could know all that knowing could be, and depart therefrom into extensions of this act was incomprehensible. Only when I departed from the knowable and entered the unknowable had I ever experienced or found my reality.[132]

The conversation with Harold Rosenberg that Still references in his diary entries from the time represents (at least from Still's perspective) the kind of insensitive appropriations of developments in painting for which critics like Rosenberg and Greenberg were becoming famous. Still mentions that at the time of their encounter at the Club, his companions were "all extolling the courage and brilliance of Rosenberg's ARt News (sic) article."[133] Still, with his sights set well into the future, refuses the immediate gratification and praise of critics who have not taken his work as seriously as he has.

Still saw such articulations on the part of Rosenberg and Greenberg as shameless sycophancy. In Still's mind, he was above becoming a token used by critics to serve a social agenda. So great was the artist's desire to remain above the fetishization of critics and gallery-owners that he lived in near-complete isolation in western Maryland from the years 1961 until

his death in 1980. The artist's diaries and correspondence from before that time provide the historian with innumerable details of affronts and threats to Still's individuality as well as supposed attempts at stifling the full reach of his instrument of painting.

"A universal style…"

As whole-heartedly as Still believed in absolute individuality and resignation to silent reflection in apprehending his canvases, I believe I have come to a point where I may momentarily speak over the artist's conceptions with a considerate and well-researched hypothesis. As romantic and insulating as it might be, to lead a life devoid of responsibility or influence upon and from others is not possible, at least to the extreme point that Still believed it to be. Furthermore, it is most impossible in light of a material legacy, which communicates to viewers well after its creator has perished. Artwork will inevitably elicit words used to communicate its presence to other "spectators" and even unto ourselves as singular viewers.

Words do bear the burden of our "stuttering life,"[134] to again quote Still, and their absence in direct experience is a contributing factor to the open indeterminacy of the world we inhabit. (An experience which cannot be adequately described by words is a candidate for the adjective *sublime*.) Among the only words that Still could tolerate (in addition to his own, which never appeared to cause the artist concern) were the poet's words—ones that fostered mystery and sensitivity, rather than supposed objective certainty.

Still centered his objection to Rosenberg's words on one of the critic's ideas: "Since an instrument was a part of the process of extension, it had to seem to an onlooker that use had to extend beyond and be related to seemingly parallel or similar instruments. Childish as the deduction is, it is the most common I know: that the instrument makes men like one another."[135]

It is most probable that Still uses the phrase "like one another" not as a means to say that men will be made to "get along," but rather "like unto each other"—in other words, equals. As utopian and idealistic as the consequences might have been, Still objected repeatedly to the political and social appropriation of abstraction that his peers, such as Barnett Newman, embraced.

That stark absence of image and referent could warrant a universal, wordless experience seems to Still to be a gross oversimplification of his painting. Still continues in his diary:

> Only the political or that which related directly to the end of social controls and directions was to him [Rosenberg] valid as an act and as a means. The nonsocial or a-social thought or act bore him no corroboration. As a parasite must resent any independent act of that on which it feeds, so the political man must strive to establish a total inertia of all the members of the body on which he thrives.[136]

It is here that Still betrays not just a point at which he and I differ in opinion, but also in which the artist refuses to treat perception and the ambiguities of vision as the site upon which perceptual beings construct arbitrary difference. I believe that there is a central commonality among all perceptual beings. I hypothesize, and aim to substantiate, that this similarity is our unconscious memory of first sight: the one un-mediated experience of a resolved image or environment before vision becomes subject to social and inter-individual conventions.

I will take a page from Still's diary and avoid any attempts at making "fact" out of my own experience with his matte black canvases. As I have stated in previous sections, this writing may represent no more than a personal reflection, buttressed at stages by evidence of similar thoughts to my own from Still's contemporaries and the artist himself. For example, since Still designed and taught a class for young artists focusing on sight and perception, I assume these

topics were of some concern to him. Because he taught classes on philosophy and esthetics, and because he wrote about these subjects throughout his life, I also assume he was informed on the prevailing trends in the history of artistic theory.

Despite Still's familiarity with these subjects, the artist authored very few explicit statements revealing his thoughts on perception, esthetics, and art criticism; on these subjects, Still wrote very little "fact." Most often, Still leaves us tirades against fact and the misunderstandings published as criticism of his art. Among these admonishments are passages that decry any attempt to politicize Still's paintings. I shall not attempt to draw out the political or social significance of my previous statement—that all perceptual beings share one thing, their first memories of sight—but will leave that task to the reader, taking this information back to their respective fields of interest.

Perhaps Still was so reluctant to reveal his direct intentions or to outline a clearly-stated philosophy to which to compare his work because it would create the certainty he so detested. In the face of Still's own ambiguous (and oftentimes contradictory) philosophy of independence, I feel liberated to write at length about my own thoughts that have come from contemplating Still's matte black work. This freedom is a precious gift, distinguished above all other contributions made by the artist to the present state of Still scholarship.

I began this final section with a quotation from Still, who uses these words to again highlight that per his conception, his paintings do not reference or illustrate anything tangible. I propose that Still's paintings are not referential or illustrative beyond the very experience that defines all that we see. Still's paintings, in their monochromatic darkness, re-initiate our first experience of sight, out of which comes all subsequent definite images. As such, Still's paintings re-create the phenomena that eventually define "spaces, or bigness, or depth, or objects, or

images."[137] Nevertheless, at the point perceptual subjects are viewing the canvases, this resolution has not been reached. Rather, the experience of viewing Still's matte black work simulates the experience of beginning to see everything which follows, including Still's canvases.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenologist whom I have briefly quoted, echoes this sentiment. In a prospectus of his work, Merleau-Ponty states:

> We grasp external space through our bodily situation. A 'corporeal or postural schema' gives us at every moment a global, practical, and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, of our hold on them.
>
> [...]
>
> We find that perceived things, unlike geometrical objects, are not bounded entities whose laws of construction we possess *a priori*, but that they are open, inexhaustible systems which we recognize through a certain style of development, although we are never able, in principle, to explore them entirely, and even though they never give us more than profiles and perspectival views of themselves. Finally, we find that the perceived world, in its turn, is not a pure object of thought without fissures or lacunae; it is rather, like a universal style shared in by all perceptual beings. While the world no doubt co-ordinates (sic) these perceptual beings, we can never presume that its work is finished."[138]

Still did not collect any of Merleau-Ponty's texts, and he gave no indication of having read them. I chose this philosopher's ideas to substantiate my own, seizing on the fact that Still and Merleau-Ponty were of the same generation (Still was born in 1904, Merleau-Ponty in 1908) and because both concerned themselves with the intricacies of vision without stating the consequences of their innovation. Merleau-Ponty's writings form the basis for the

phenomenological apprehension of the world of objects, within which are situated countless precious artworks.

Without using the word "phenomenological," this is the very perspective from which Still operated and insists others operate as well. He states in his diary:

> It was a fundamental of my purpose to release "art" or painting from the aesthetic and philosophical traps which had come to hedge it round, and to create a medium whose content could not merely embrace but extend the capacity for high experience beyond that which literature, mathematics or music had achieved or could achieve. The only limitations were those which made impossible the realization of such an aspiration. Such rejections of means must inevitably include the technical methods and content of the authoritarian and materialistic dimensional modes of thought, which comprise our immediate cultural inheritance.[139]

Here, Still briefly identifies the impossibility of expanding perceiving subjects' vision using tools already imbued with perceptual conventions (read: "aesthetic and philosophical traps"). To subvert these, Still created baffling abstractions, ones nearly entirely void of differentiation (see again the central objects of this thesis, reproduced in Figures 1-5). However, Still cannot subvert the necessary mediation involved in communicating his philosophy to perceptual subjects. I theorize that the instrument of painting itself, particularly the matte black finish and lack of obvious contrasting elements in these paintings, is what initiates a wordless relay between viewers and their first memory.

Merleau-Ponty offers a corresponding sense of phenomenological reflection as "[stepping] back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice."[140] By

observing a matte black Still painting, I am brought back to the "corporeal or postural schema" in which I first saw the world. To provide a basis for this claim, which defines an experience only I may have had in the context of Still's artwork, I must delve into a brief summary of some recent theories in the field of philosophy and psychology.

Within our psychological processes, memories play a foundational role in providing the basis for present experience. This is a logical psychological assertion, as our present cognition must follow a primary experience or insight that is operative from a place in the past.[141] Memories are presented unto ourselves, internally, and without the mediation of language to "explain" them. In their landmark study on personal memory, Georgia Nigro and Ulric Neisser establish the fact that past experiences are represented to their possessor in the *field* and *observer* perspectives. In the *field* perspective of memory, perceiving subjects occupy their past selves as though present for the experience of what they are remembering. From the *observer* perspective, perceiving subjects' memories are viewed from the outside, as though they are onlookers at themselves experiencing the past.[142]

In cases of traumatic memories, the field perspective of experiencing these memories is so strong the subject often feels he or she is inhabiting the remembered moment again. As subjects are "reliving" these memories, past and present become inseparable, and their bodies experience nervous responses such as anxiety or rushes of adrenaline.[143] If all perceptual beings do have an unconscious memory of first sight, I propose that this is a memory we constantly inhabit, and come to take for granted. As stated previously, it is to our species' advantage to follow patterns of visual experience, lest we lose focus in constant rumination and reevaluation of the world around us. Still's matte black works make literal this first memory by occupying

perceiving subjects' "corporeal or postural schema"[144] as the viewers gaze into them and see no resolved image. As I stand in front of *PH-235* or *PH-1106* (Figures 1 and 4, respectively), I physically occupy the position of a perceptual being experiencing contrast originating out of what was at first consistent and without variation.

Most stimuli from the natural world will necessarily resolve into the environment, object, or phenomenon we are observing. For example, no matter how opaque or blinding fog and mist may be, they are visually referential (both denotative and connotative) of mist and fog. These environments resolve into what we expect from mist and fog: they occlude our vision. Still's matte black paintings recreate this perceptual conundrum, but they do not resolve into what we expect from a painting. What critics and viewers from the past and today "see" in Still's work is not inherent in the work. Instead, these associated forms ("convenient crutches of association" as Still saw them)[145] are a projection of ideas onto a surface intangible and unfixed enough to sustain almost any association—an experience akin to (and as consequential as) watching clouds take the form of animals and common objects as they pass overhead.

That memories are represented within ourselves, visually, allows for a pure apprehension of past experience—that is, without words mediating it. In this way, our own memories wordlessly communicate prior experience to us constantly. Memory serves a functional purpose, which is to contextualize and coordinate present experience in light of the past. I propose one reason an audience might balk at the complexity of Still's uniform surfaces is that they do not offer themselves as pictorially elaborate. Perceptual subjects may take these paintings for granted as plain surfaces, because they do not make obvious their variation.

Despite this, the detail I see within one of Still's paintings is arbitrary. I note what contrasts and inconsistencies stand out to me. In *PH-108* (Figure 2) I have seen flecks of paint

from other canvases (oranges, whites, and reds) that shine forth like gemstones. In front of *PH-235* (Figure 1) I have witnessed the bare canvas punctuate the barren dark surface just as stars mark the night sky. I make the most of any variety I can detect, as it means *something* is occurring on the surface of an otherwise uniform plane. As I practice this searching, no resolved image emerges; what I see is best expressed as a simile, which never entirely becomes the thing it describes. These surfaces allow viewers to exercise vision without leading them too deep into the definition and certainty wrought by our eyes in the day-to-day world.

The crags and fissures of paint in *PH-241*, for instance (see Figure 3), do not resolve into mimetic representations of the geological crags and fissures of the American West. No matter how many of these geological formations Still may have seen during the course of his observant youth beyond the Rocky Mountains, their appearance within Still's work amounts to no more than a coincidence of forms. Still does not abstract referents in the tangible world; rather, the artist distorts or abstracts the process which allows us to perceive referents at all.

In this case, Still's lines, two of which can be seen in *PH-108* and *PH-72* (Figures 2 and 5, respectively) are not represented as they exist in nature, but instead exist on the canvas as they are *perceived* in nature—unsteady, subject to perspectival uncertainty. Similarly, the colors visible on, or even underneath the matte black surface of Still's paradigmatic canvases sit vibrating as though waiting to be noticed, as though contained by a boundary that separates land from water.

Where the blue portions of *PH-241* (Figure 3) end and black begins (or vice-versa) is subject more to perspective and patience in looking than it is to an objective reading of the arrangement of pigment. I could even say that the blue portion of *PH-241* does not end—that it

instead continues unseen as an underground stream might, leaving only vague evidence of its presence discernable over millions of years.

It would be both wrong and a cliché to write that Still's work re-creates the *feeling* of seeing the variation we notice. Feeling never enters the equation; it comes long after the conventions of sight are in place. Eventually, the things we notice will be subject to our desires and fears. Still's work, however, parallels the innocent moments before feeling tainted vision, and before vision tainted feeling. To echo Professor Richard Shiff's statement presented at the beginning of this section, how we *feel* about Clyfford Still, or the quality and variety of his mark, or the complete works the artist created is not mirrored by the objects. All of that information is secondary to the presence of Still's surfaces, which resist tangible associations at all turns.

This is in part due to the inexpressive means through which Still created his surfaces. Using a paint trowel to scrape and build up pigment on the surface of his canvases, Still acted as a mason more than an expressive painter. Without the brushstrokes which would record the individuality and vitality of Still's hand, today's audience is presented with a de-personalized field to interrogate sight.

"Swamps of generalization…"

I should note, as I conclude this section, that Still would likely object to my preceding claim: that memory should come to bear on the individual experience of his work. In one of his many diary entries, the artist declares:

> I must insist it be remembered that the means of the artist, the instruments of his craft, are also swamps of seduction quite as insidious as the swamps of generalization such as memory, history, or geometry.[146]

This passage in particular was penned after Still noted that he had reread his and Mark Rothko's statements from Dorothy Miller's *15 Americans* catalogue. At the center of Still's objections to Rothko's statement is the audience or observer as a liability to clarity. Rothko identifies the life of a painting as dependent upon a viewer, writing:

> A picture lives by companionship, expanding and quickening in the eyes of a sensitive observer. It dies by the same token. It is therefore a risky act to send it out into the world. How often it must be impaired by the eyes of the unfeeling and the cruelty of the impotent who would extend their affliction universally![147]

While Rothko took for granted that an audience would need instruction and heightened attunement to his project, Still never made such concessions. As a result, 95% of the artist's total production was in his family's possession at the time of his death and almost entirely unseen until 2011. This is an extreme example of individuality and singularity in vision, which Still explains in opposition to Rothko's generosity with his work:

> His [Rothko's] paintings for him live through the eyes of the understanding observer; for me such a dependency on the observer is out of the question. The picture lived for me primarily in the act of its creation, and I lived in the act at my highest sensitivity and thought. The observer at such a time is irrelevant and whether he will find sufficiency or rejection or hope is his concern, not mine. I do not invite judgements, nor emotional reaction as a concomitant of my act; -- nor value them as an intrinsic relationship. I alone am the only viable judge of my work and I am the severest possible critic in the terms I alone demand.
>
> Of course I am disappointed by Mark's need to invite the public into his confidence.

While never explicitly saying as much, Rothko's vision for the clarity of his paintings depends also upon a viewer's sensitivities aligning with his own. The paintings Still created, especially his matte black works, are considered and clarified in spite of Still's own contradictory claims. One such contradiction is present in Still's mandate that it be "*remembered*" that "memory, history, or geometry" are "swamps of seduction."[148] The previous sections have simultaneously illuminated both the artist and thinker Still knew himself to be, while drawing some attention to the reality of contradictory thought resting just below the surface of Still's claims.

Still did make plans for the eventual exhibition of the large majority of his paintings. He outlined this intent in a one-page will and testament, stating that his work should be left to a city capable of constructing and maintaining a museum dedicated solely to his legacy and the objects that comprise it. Still's wish for his own museum was fulfilled thirty-one years after his death in 1980. Just before his death, Still collaborated with the Metropolitan Museum of Art to stage (at that time) their largest retrospective of a living artist; the Metropolitan exhibition is Still's largest single showing to date. While he always intended for his work to be seen (and therefore subject to vocal or written analysis, critique, and description), the manner of this communication was an object of great concern.

Still's refusal to give more than personal insights and critiques of his own works, combined with warnings and mandates to viewers, allows for some degree of cautious freedom in articulating the experience of his work. First among these imperatives was that Still's work is the physical product of his conception of the instrument of painting as a means of individual insight. Secondly, Still claimed his work was not illustrative or representational of any tangible referent. Rather, I suggest, the paintings' correspondence to reality rests in their indeterminacy as

being parallel to the very experience that allows perceiving subjects to witness the canvases in the first place.

As a result, the nascent detail in Still's most challenging abstractions is overlooked, as is the diversity and variation in our perceptual capabilities. This quiet, shifting quality of the canvases incorporates them seamlessly into the realm of visual experience in art and far beyond. Just as we take for granted our capacity for sight, we take for granted its renewal moment to moment. The world around us is the product of patterns and conventions in place since the time of our ancestors; it is also born again in every instance, and its boundaries and definition are illuminated as living and breathing with their audience, silently.

Conclusion

"Every work of art says to you, 'see me, if you can.'" – Alva Noë[149]

When I first learned who Clyfford Still was, it was through his work. The two Still paintings that hang in the Long-Sarofim gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston always caught my passing attention if only because of their brooding vacuity. Though I had heard of Mark Rothko, Jackson Pollock, and other artists from the Abstract Expressionist generation, these works were my introduction to Clyfford Still. The first of Still's matte black works for which I developed an affection (*PH-241,* Figure 3) rested one floor below the curatorial offices in which I worked, and I visited it every day. Next to the dazzling *Orange and Black Wall* by Franz Kline (Figure 20), or *No. 14* by Mark Rothko (Figure 31), *PH-241* really was empty and distant as a void. Where Still's painting hung seemed to be an absence, something into which a visitor might fall.

I remember I did not "get" what was happening, as so many likely do when viewing Still's work. What I saw when I looked at Still's matte black work was black paint. This is the point at which insecurity gets the best of an interpretation: was this painting as empty as it seemed? Still's subtle rigor leads audiences to facile reductions, though more often his subtlety yields no reductions at all. Still's work simply is: it reveals few avenues along which to lead it to or from anything else.

When the day came for me to give a tour of the Long-Sarofim gallery to my colleagues, I skipped over Still's matte black *PH-241* to avoid the embarrassment of pontificating in front of a canvas as silent as the changing of day into night. I chose to discuss the dynamic Kline that hung nearby. I stated that often Kline's work is mistaken for being monumental, when in fact his

canvases so neatly cordon off the extremities of where just one individual may be capable of reaching. Kline's paintings were not immense, but intimate. To illustrate this point, I had my guests stretch their arms and spread their feet; in doing so, they became as large as Kline's supposedly "larger-than-life" brushstrokes.

Though not as acrobatically as Kline's, Still's canvases do force us to inhabit a different corporeal reality. That reality is often mistaken for being without incident: taken for granted. There is a "something" happening in Kline's work, even if it is just the appearance of brushwork that is clearly discerned from its ground. If I see "nothing" in a Still, the act of viewership is seamless with the operation of my vision. Much of the detail of the world around me I take for granted simply because our patterned vision reveals very few surprises. The same could be said about Still's work, especially his matte black paintings: these works do not resolve into a definite image, no matter how long I spend looking at them. Rather, what is represented by my looking is the amorphous and intangible phenomenon of vision itself.

Throughout this writing, I have intended to establish that Still's paintings contain all that we see—precede it, in fact. To echo Still's own claim that his works were not illustrative of anything, the potency of these paintings lies in their phenomenological apprehension as churning and desolate. Looking at a Still work in matte black is akin to letting my eyes adjust after turning out the last light in my home. For a moment, all is black. Second by second, my eyes adjust, and small incidents of light come to bear on a developing scene: the glow of a streetlight filters through the blinds and defines the corner where two walls meet; the green of a blinking computer button illuminates the mass of a desk. The room is not as dark as it first seemed to be. Eventually, my eyes adjust enough to navigate in the darkness and find my way.

Clyfford Still's matte black works do not represent an object, but instead an unending process. They do not illustrate a phenomenon, but reinitiate its origins. To see, to establish the object of our looking, we as perceptual beings must construct a scene by apprehending contrasting elements. Our sight depends upon being able to recognize and ascribe significance to difference: contrast in illumination. Without any discernible form qualifying the product of our looking, a viewer may find in Still's matte black everything from the world outside of the painting's confines. And all that is seen in them may be at that moment true—so long as we do not mistake it for the truth.

Fig. 1. Clyfford Still, *PH-235*, 1944, oil on canvas, 105 1/2 x 92 1/2 inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

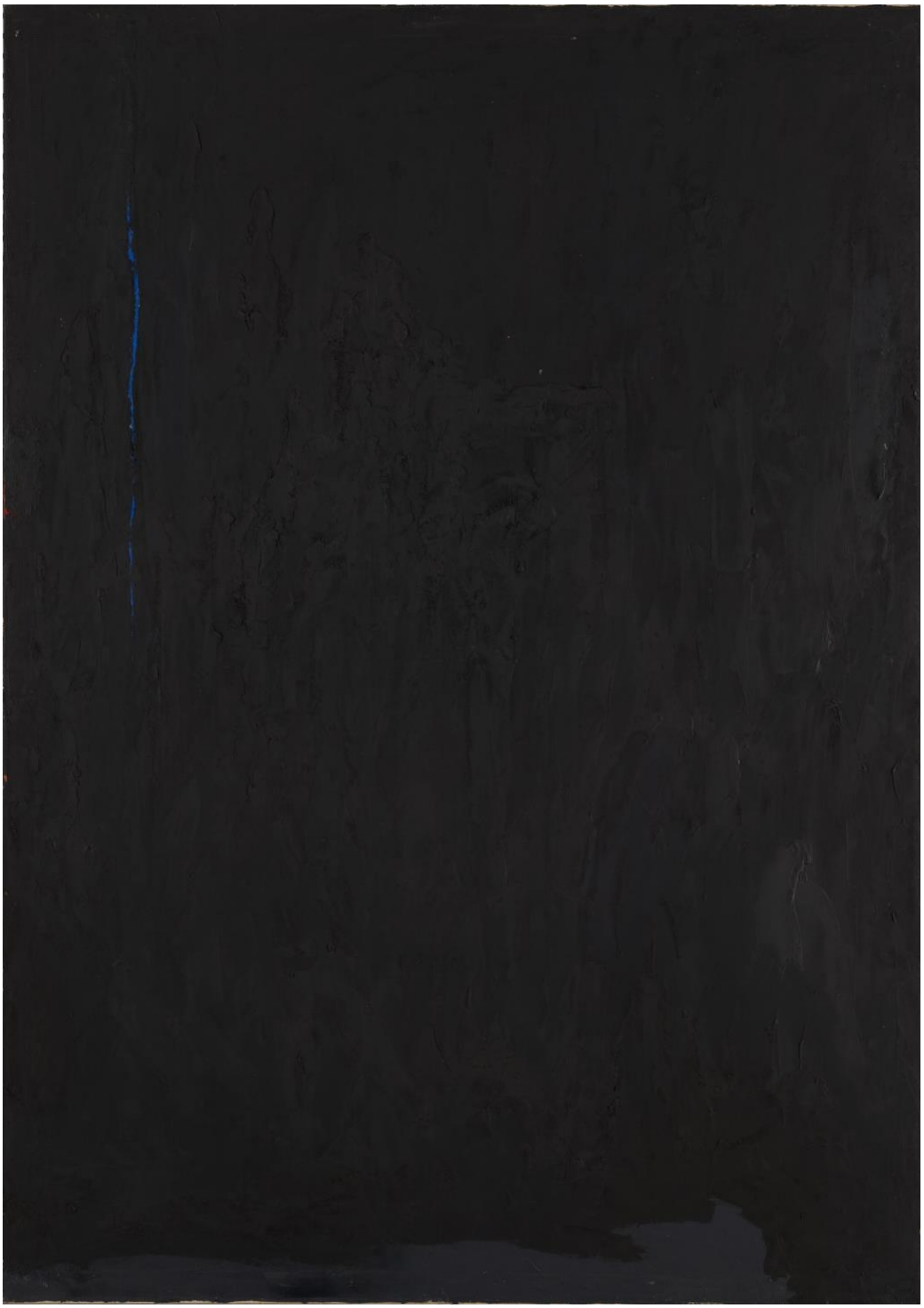

Fig. 2. Clyfford Still, *PH-108*, 1949, oil on canvas, 69 3/4 x 49 3/8 inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 3. Clyfford Still, *PH-241*, 1949, oil on canvas, 68 × 58 1/4 inches. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, TX.

Fig. 4. Clyfford Still, *PH-1106*, 1950, oil on canvas, 92 3/4 x 108 7/8 inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 5. Clyfford Still, *PH-72*, 1957, oil on canvas, 74 1/2 x 81 inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 6. Claude Monet, *Water Lilies*, after 1916, oil on canvas, 79 x 168 inches. The National Gallery, London, UK.

Fig. 7. Clyfford Still, *PH-1180*, 1949, oil on canvas, 71 x 62 ⅞ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 8. Clyfford Still, *November 1950*, 1950, oil on canvas, 80 x 68 inches. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.

Fig. 9. Clyfford Still, *PH-397*, 1948-49, oil on canvas, 68 ¼ x 62 inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 10. Adolph Gottlieb, *The Rape of Persephone*, 1943, oil on canvas, 34 3/16 x 26 ⅛ inches. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH.

Fig. 11. Mark Rothko, *The Syrian Bull*, 1943, oil and graphite on canvas, 39 ⅜ x 27 ⅞ inches. Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH.

Fig. 12. Clyfford Still, *PH-414*, 1934-35, oil on canvas, 50 x 35 ¾ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

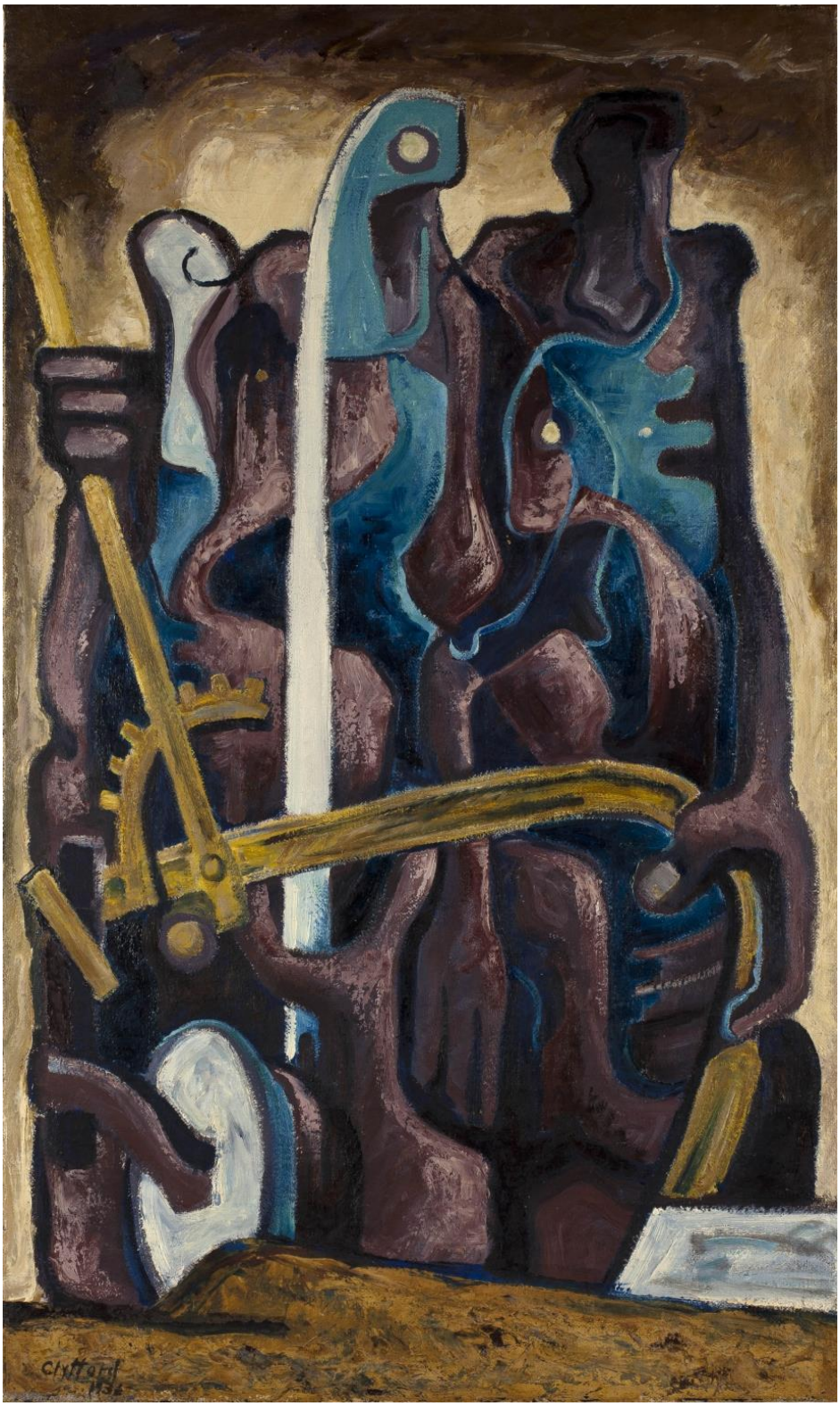

Fig. 13. Clyfford Still, *PH-211*, 1936, oil on burlap, 59 ¼ x 35 ½ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 14. Clyfford Still, *PH-619*, 1930-31, oil on canvas, 33 ⅝ x 47 ¾ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 15. Clyfford Still, *PH-257*, 1935, oil on canvas, 30 x 24 ⅛ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 16. Clyfford Still, *PH-382 (Self-Portrait)*, 1940, oil on canvas, 41 ½ x 38 ⅛ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 17. Clyfford Still, *PH-554*, 1942, oil on canvas, 48 ⅛ x 38 ⅞ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 18. Clyfford Still, *PH-314* (*The Spectre and the Perroquet*), 1945, oil on canvas, 62 ½ x 45 ½ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 19. Clyfford Still, *PH-514*, 1940, oil on paper, 15 x 12 inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 20. Clyfford Still, *PH-535*, 1943, watercolor and gouache on paper, 18 x 11 inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 21. Clyfford Still, *PH-254*, 1945, oil on canvas, 91 x 68 ⅝ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 22. Clyfford Still, *PH-354*, 1945, oil on canvas, 43 ⅝ x 28 inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 23. Clyfford Still, *PH-300*, 1945, Oil on canvas, 57 ⅜ x 31 ¾ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 24. Clyfford Still, *1941-2-c*, 1941-42, oil on canvas, 45 ⅛ x 34 ¾ inches. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.

Fig. 25. Clyfford Still, *1948-E*, 1948, oil on canvas, 82 x 69 inches. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.

Fig. 26. Clyfford Still, *PH-217,* 1945, oil on canvas, 59 ⅝ x 38 ⅝ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 27. Clyfford Still, *PH-220*, 1947, oil on canvas, 62 ⅜ x 41 ¼ inches. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

Fig. 28. Clyfford Still, *1951-52*, 1951-1952, oil on canvas, 118 ¾ x 156 inches. The Art Institute of Chicago, IL.

Fig. 29. Clyfford Still, *1950-A-No.2*, 1950, oil on canvas, 108 ¾ × 92 inches. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

Fig. 30. Franz Kline, *Orange and Black Wall*, 1959, oil on canvas, 66 ¾ x 144 ½ inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, TX.

Fig. 31. Mark Rothko, *No. 14*, 1961, oil on canvas, 92 ⅞ x 80 inches. Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Houston, TX.

Notes to text, pages 1-63

[1] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated November 23, 1955. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO. In the following sections, I have maintained Clyfford Still's original (and sometimes irregular) punctuation and syntax as written in his diaries and correspondence.

[2] Cathleen Chaffee and Michael Auping. *Shade: Clyfford Still/ Mark Bradford*. Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 2016.

[3] "Shade: Clyfford Still / Mark Bradford." Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Accessed July 26, 2019. https://www.albrightknox.org/art/exhibitions/shade-clyfford-still-mark-bradford.

[4] Cathleen Chaffee, "Light out of Black," in *Clyfford Still, Mark Bradford: Shade* (Buffalo, NY: Albright-Knox Art Gallery, 2016), 28-30.

[5] Letter to Dorothy and Ed Cahill, August 13, 1954. Manuscript by Clyfford Still. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

[6] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Merleau-Ponty's Prospectus of His Work," in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 36-37. Throughout this thesis I will write using the third-person plural perspective, often criticized as a "royal we." In his own writing, Merleau-Ponty refers to individuals as "perceiving subjects" or "perceptual beings" When I do "speak for" anyone it is these individuals granted the capacity for sight and other perceptual faculties.

[7] Henri Matisse, "Black Is a Colour," in *Colour*, ed. David Batchelor (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2008), 100.

[8] Clyfford Still. Quoted in Katharine Kuh, foreword to *Clyfford Still: Thirty-Three Paintings in the Albright-Knox Art Gallery* (Buffalo, NY: The Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1966), 10.

[9] Richard Shiff. "Phototropism (Figuring the Proper)." *Studies in the History of Art* 20 (1989), 161.

[10] Siegfried Kracauer and Thomas Y. Levin. "Photography." Critical Inquiry 19, no. 3 (Spring 1993), 427-428.

[11] Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," In *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 213.

[12] Irving Sandler. *Abstract Expressionism: The Triumph of American Painting*. London: Pall Mall Press, 1970, 1.

[13] Ibid., 3. Sandler concludes his introduction: "At first, it was difficult to determine sub-tendencies in Abstract Expressionism. Around 1949, however, it grew increasingly apparent that there were two main trends, gesture painting and color-field painting. The elucidation of these tendencies, in both art historical and socio-cultural terms, has been the purpose of this study." I take it as no coincidence that Sandler is shedding light on this era, making its nuance and variation easier to see.

[14] Ibid., 1.

[15] Merleau-Ponty (2004) 37.

[16] Jonathan Hogeback. "Are Black and White Colors?" In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Accessed June 27, 2019. https://www.britannica.com/story/are-black-and-white-colors.

[17] Sandler (1970) 2.

[18] Reproduced in Bonnie Clearwater. "Shared Myths: Reconsideration of Rothko's and Gottlieb's Letter to The New York Times." *Archives of American Art Journal* 1 (1984): 23-25. The letter Rothko and Gottlieb sent to Jewell on June 7, 1943 is on file at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.
[19] Clearwater (1984) 23. "3. It is our function as artists to make the spectator see the world our way - not his."
[20] Ibid.
[21] Rothko's draft of a letter to E.A. Jewell, excerpted in Clearwater (1984) 24.
[22] Maureen Turman, "Chronology," in *Clyfford Still: Paintings, 1944-1960*, ed. James T. Demetrion (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2001), 163.
[23] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated 1946. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[24] Mark Rothko. "Introduction." In *First Exhibition, Paintings: Clyfford Still*. New York: Art of This Century Gallery, 1946.
[25] Clyfford Still, unpublished diary entry, 1945.
[26] Turman (2001) 163.
[27]https://collection.clyffordstillmuseum.org/ - listing of collected works present in first San Francisco Show
[28] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated Fall 1945. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Turman (2001) 163.
[33]"Clyfford Still Museum Online Collection." Clyfford Still Museum. Last modified 2019. Accessed August 6, 2019. https://collection.clyffordstillmuseum.org/.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Rothko (1946).
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.
[38] Mark Rothko, and Adolph Gottlieb. Letter to Edward Alden Jewell, "A Letter to the Art Editor of the New York Times," June 7, 1943. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.
[39]Edward Alden Jewell. "A War Memorial: Specific Plan Offered, with Background of Controversy--Some New Shows." *The New York Times*, February 24, 1946, 6.
[40] Judith Kaye Reed. "Extending a Myth." Art Digest 20 (1 March 1946): 17.
[41]"Clifford Still." ARTnews 44 (February 1946): 92.
[42] Rothko (1946)
[43] "Clifford Still" (1946) 92.
[44] Brooks Adams, "'Raw Mineral Jaggedness': A Clyfford Still Legacy," in *Clyfford Still: Paintings, 1944-1960*, ed. James T. Demetrion (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 142.
[45] Turman (2001) 164.
[46] "Clifford Still." ARTnews 46 (May 1947): 50.
[47] Rothko (1946).

[48] Clyfford Still. *PH-235*. 1944. Oil on canvas. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO. Accessed August 6, 2019. https://collection.clyffordstillmuseum.org/object/ph-235.
[49] Alonzo Lansford. "Fifty-Seventh Street in Review: Still's Legerdermain." *Art Digest* 21 (April 15, 1947): 22.
[50] Howard Devree. "Groups and Singly." New York Times, 20 April 1947, 7.
[51] Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," in *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 221.
[52] Ibid., 220.
[53] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated February 28, 1946. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[54] Ibid., 226.
[55] Ibid., 220.
[56] Thomas B Hess. "The Modern Museum's Fifteen: Where U.S. Extremes Meet." ARTnews, April 1952. 19.
[57] Ibid., 19, 65.
[58] Ibid., 65.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ashton, Dore. "An Eastern View of the San Francisco School." *Evergreen Review* 1 (1957): 149.
[62] Ibid., 151.
[63] Hess (1952) 65.
[64] Robert Rosenblum. "The Abstract Sublime." In New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970, edited by Henry Geldzahler, 350-59. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969.
[65] Chaffee (2016) 30.
[66] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated July 1958. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[67] Clyfford Still, *Clyfford Still*, comp. Henry Hopkins (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1976), 124.
[68] Clyfford Still. "A Letter to Gordon Smith." In *Paintings by Clyfford Still*, compiled by Gordon M. Smith. Buffalo, NY: Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, 1959.
[69] William Blake. "The Everlasting Gospel." 1818. In *The Portable Blake*, edited by Alfred Kazin, 610-23. New York: Viking Press, 1946. Still had a particular fondness for Blake's poems, marking "The Everlasting Gospel" in several of his collections of poetry.
[70] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated July 13, 1969. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[71] "About the Museum." Clyfford Still Museum. Last modified 2019. Accessed June 30, 2019. https://clyffordstillmuseum.org/about-the-museum/.
[72] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated 1934. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[73] Turman (2001) 163.
[74] Ibid.

[75] Clyfford Still's teaching materials, accessed 12 April 2019. Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated September 7, 1947. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *ARTnews* 51, no. 8 (1952): 22,23, 48-50.
[80] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated October 4, 1954. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Clyfford Still, "Clyfford Still," in *15 Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952), 22.
[84] Clement Greenberg. "After Abstract Expressionism." In *New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970*, edited by Henry Geldzahler, 360-71. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1969.
[85] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated April 20, 1955. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Clement Greenberg, "'American-Type' Painting," *Partisan Review* 12, no. 2 (Spring 1955): 191.
[88] Ibid., 190.
[89] Clyfford Still. Letter to Clement Greenberg, April 12, 1955. Clement Greenberg papers, 1937-1983. Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Greenberg (1961) 224.
[92] Greenberg (1955) 192.
[93] Ibid.
[94] Greenberg (1961) 223.
[95] Ibid., 224.
[96] Greenberg (1955) 192.
[97] Greenberg (1969) 368.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Still to Greenberg.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Dore Ashton, "The Beginnings of an American Avant-Garde," in *The Unknown Shore: A View of Contemporary Art* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), 8. Ashton states, "The romantic intransigence of European artists, transplanted to America, took on an eccentric character." Necessarily, romantic convictions would have included early conceptions of the sublime.
[102] See Lawrence Alloway. "The American Sublime." Living Arts 2 (1963): 11-22.
[103] See Robert Rosenblum. "The Abstract Sublime." In New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970, edited by Henry Geldzahler, 350-59. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1969.
[104] Still to Greenberg.
[105] Greenberg (1969) 369.

[106] Ibid., 370.
[107] Greenberg (1961) 221.
[108] Neal Benezra, "Clyfford Still's Replicas," in *Clyfford Still: Paintings, 1944-1960*, ed. James T. Demetrion (Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 2001), 89.
[109] Letter to Sidney Janis (not sent), 1954. Manuscript by Clyfford Still. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[110] Jane Forsey. "Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 383.
[111] Turman (2001) 163.
[112] Longinus. "On the Sublime," translated by W. Rhys Roberts. In *Aristotle's Poetics: Longinus on the Sublime*, edited by Charles Sears Baldwin, 57-128. New York: Macmillan, 1930.
[113] Ibid., 83.
[114] Ibid.
[115] Longinus. "Longinus on the Sublime," translated by T.S. Dorsch. In Classical Literary Criticism, 99-158. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1965.
[116] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated 1950. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Clyfford Still's diary note, 1946. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated 1944. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated 1945. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[123] Richard Shiff, "Still's Marks." Lecture, *Clyfford Still: The View From The 21st Century*, Sotheby's New York, October 2013.
[124] Letter to Dorothy Miller, May 11, 1952. Manuscript by Clyfford Still. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[125] Georigine Oeri, *Man and His Images: A Way of Seeing* (New York: Viking Press, 1968), 7.
[126]Jewell (1946) 6.
[127] Greenberg (1955) 189.
[128] Greenberg (1958) 221. The critic states, "It was maybe a dozen years ago that some of Monet's later paintings began to seem 'possible' to people like myself." Monet's later monochromes (see Figure 6) set a precedent for Still's abstract undertakings in a similarly concise palette.
[129] Clement Greenberg. "Abstract and Representational." *Arts Digest* 29 (November 1, 1954): 6-8.
[130] Ibid., 6.
[131] Ibid., 7.
[132] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated August 13, 1953. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.

[133] Ibid.
[134] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated 1945. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Ibid.
[137] Letter to Dorothy Miller, May 11, 1952. Manuscript by Clyfford Still. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[138] Merleau-Ponty (2004) 36-37.
[139] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated November 23, 1955. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[140] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Selections from *The Phenomenology of Perception*," trans. Colin Smith and Forrest Williams, in *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), 70.
[141] Georgia Nigro and Ulric Neisser, "Point of View in Personal Memories," *Cognitive Psychology* 15 (1983): 468.
[142] Ibid.
[143] John Sutton, "Observer Perspective and Acentered Memory: Some Puzzles about Point of View in Personal Memory," *Philosophical Studies* 148, no. 1 (March 2010): 34.
[144] Merleau-Ponty (2004) 36.
[145] Letter to Dorothy Miller, May 11, 1952. Manuscript by Clyfford Still. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[146] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated July 12, 1952. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO. Still is quoting Rothko's *15 Americans* statement in which Rothko writes, "As examples of such obstacles, I give (among others) memory, history, or geometry, which are swamps of generalization from which one might pull out parodies of ideas (which are ghosts) but never an idea in itself."
[147] Mark Rothko, "Mark Rothko," in *15 Americans*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1952), 18.
[148] Clyfford Still's diary note, typescript dated July 12, 1952. Courtesy the Clyfford Still Archives, Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO.
[149] Alva Noë and Lawrence Weschler, "In Conversation," in *Strange Pilgrims*, comp. Heather Pesanti (Austin: The Contemporary Austin, 2015), 44-45.

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